

Pride and Perseverance by AnimeFaeMoon

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Summary:

Riki and Iason have returned to Amoï and try to resume their lives after so many changes.

(WARNING! THIS STORY CONTAINS MALE ON MALE RELATIONSHIPS AND SOME SCENES ARE EXPLICIT. DO NOT READ THIS STORY IF YOU ARE UNDER THE AGE OF EIGHTEEN OR IF YOU FIND SUCH THINGS DISTURBING. YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED!!!)

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Chapter 1

Author's Note:

MERRY (EARLY) CHRISTMAS!!! Well, here it is ladies and gents, as promised the third and final part of Blondies Have More Fun. Thank you for your patience in waiting for it. I will try and update weekly if not more often, depending on how the holidays and my work schedule is going. Please feel free to leave a comment. Thank you for your continued support.

Iason stood facing his brother solemnly as Raoul briefed him. The trip back from Avalon was not a long one, and he'd made proper use of it by keeping Riki in bed for the majority of it. Despite his satisfaction from Riki, he did not feel one hundred percent, and he hoped the issue was only that he had yet to join properly with Jupiter. The joining himself concerned him because then She may glean enough to know what he had learned about Riki on Avalon, he was not at all sure how She would perceive it or if she would consider Riki a threat.

"And there can be no mistake?" he asked Raoul quietly.

"None. I was very thorough in my investigation, Iason. Jupiter has also confirmed that She sensed such things from him, though She had been unaware what it was until I reported my findings.

"I see." Raoul never made mistakes when it came to such situations. His prowess in discovering the truth of things was unrivaled. "That is disappointing."

"Yes."

"What is to be his punishment?"

"Jupiter has not decided yet. I requested that She allow you to speak with Iassac first, perhaps you may learn some rational cause other than the one we can only assume."

“Yes, I will speak with him.”

Iason turned towards the window and looked out over Eos, comfortable in the familiarity of the towering white structures of the technological city surrounding them. It was a drastic comparison to the openness of nature he witnessed on Avalon, but Tanagura was his home; his and Riki’s.

“Thank you for all you have done to assist in this matter, Raoul.”

“Of course.” Raoul moved to the bar and poured two glasses of almost translucent green liquid. “You do seem to attract the worst sort of trouble since you’ve been keeping that pet, Iason.”

Iason smirked and turned as Raoul walked over and handed him one of the glasses. “Do I?”

“Don’t play coy, it hardly suits you.”

Iason shrugged. “People change.”

Raoul paused in raising his glass to his mouth. “People do,” he agreed. “We do not.”

“We were created to evolve, Raoul. Can you deny that it is your innate curiosity that drives your experiments, and with those results you change your opinions of facts you held firm in before?”

“That is science, hardly the same thing.”

“I disagree.” Iason settled into a chair, crossed one leg over another and sipped his drink as he shot Raoul a knowing gaze. “You used to hate Riki.”

“Hate is not an emotion I can be bothered with.” Raoul took the opposite chair and neatly mimicked Iason’s position. “I simply do not see the point of him, nor of the continued sacrifices you make for him.”

“Did you not recently also make sacrifices for me, Raoul?”

“Not at all. I was under Jupiter’s order and there was no personal cost on my part.”

“Ah.” Iason smiled knowingly and sipped his drink again. “The point is that you like Riki now.”

“Hardly!”

“Of course you do, or you would have ordered Katze to just return from Avalon once he had me. It would have been the perfect opportunity to get rid of my troublesome pet once and for all.”

“That too was under Jupiter’s order.” Raoul waved his hand, bored. “Who am I to challenge Her?”

Iason chuckled, finished his drink and rose. “As you like then.”

“Iason?” Raoul also rose and walked with Iason to the office portal. “Are you truly grateful for my intervening?”

“Of course.” Iason straightened his gloves, glad to have them on again. Having to touch so much and so many while on that horrid planet had been quite distasteful. “What do you want?”

Raoul smiled, Iason did know him well. “Nothing overly much...”

“I am not letting you experiment on Riki.”

“I’m no longer interested in him. I want Katze.”

Iason’s eyebrow rose again. “You wish to experiment on Katze?”

“No, I wish you to sell him to me- or if you are truly grateful, give him to me.”

“Impossible.”

“Oh come now, I am sure he has been of great help to you, but there are others who can do what he does...”

“No one can do what he does. I believe we have had this discussion before.” Iason chuckled. “Is this what Humans call Déjà vu?”

“Possibly.” Raoul grinned. “Are you so unwilling to part with him, even for an old friend whom you owe several debts to, may I add?”

“You misunderstand. I did not say I was unwilling, I said it was impossible. I cannot allow Katze to go to another. He has knowledge of vital and confidential information regarding myself and the Syndicate. That knowledge cannot fall into the wrong hands.”

Raoul studied Iason. “You mean you would terminate him if it did?”

“I would not need to. Katze has taken measures himself that should he ever be captured and can find no escape, he will end his own life. He understands the risks.”

Raoul nodded, remembering when he’d had Katze on his table not very long ago. Even though he never would have harmed the former Furniture, Katze had believed the threat to be real and was willing to take his own life. He’d dismissed the red-head’s actions until now, as there had been so many other things to deal with, but as he considered Katze’s decision, he felt a strange sensation crawl through him, one he could not yet analyze.

“I see.” Raoul searched for an alternative. He wanted Katze and he meant to have him by any means possible. “Perhaps you might lend him to me then?”

Iason smirked, his curiosity aroused. “What exactly is this experiment that you need him for?”

“It’s complicated, but he is the perfect candidate for me to get the best results.” When Iason continued to stare at him, Raoul continued. “I’m not going to irreparably damage him, Iason.”

“Meaning the damage you may cause can be repaired.”

Raoul shrugged.

“I don’t believe I will allow him to be damaged in anyway, Raoul. He has been loyal to me, and I would be...annoyed if he were injured in any way.”

“I’m kidding, of course. I promise I shall not physically harm him.” When Iason lifted an eyebrow, Raoul added. “Oh, very well, I will not physically or mentally damage him. You are tying my hands, and ruining the chance of optimal results you know?”

Iason started again towards the portal. “You are resourceful; I have no doubt you will manage.”

“So, I may use him then?”

“Yes, but only if he is not working on something important.”

Raoul nodded. “Yes, of course.” He clapped a hand on Iason’s shoulder. “Also, I’m happy to look over your pet, if you like? Ensure he’s recovering from his traumatic experience. I have a table prepared in my lab...”

Iason offered Raoul a rare, genuine smile. “Nice try.”

“Success cannot be achieved without determination.” Raoul returned mildly. “In all seriousness, you should have a pet doctor of yours give him a full physical, just in case.”

“I have already arranged for Kanin to do so.” Iason nodded. “I will see you shortly, brother.”

Raoul nodded and watched his friend disappear through the portal. He walked back to the bar and poured himself another drink. “One day, Riki. One day I will discover all your secrets.”

Katze moved away from the wall he had been leaning on as Iason appeared in the lobby of the building that housed Raoul’s condo and he fell in step beside his employer.

“How’s the leg?” Iason asked as they stepped outside.

“Healed.”

“How did you injure it?”

Katze lowered his eyes, embarrassed to say he'd been bitten by a dog. “I landed wrong going over a wall.”

“I see. You've done well, Katze. Once you've determined that everything is back in order on your end, take some time off.”

“Time...off?”

“Yes, a vacation, one, no two weeks. Perhaps stay at that beach house, it was quite relaxing for the most part.”

“I don't like the water.”

“Well, then just pick somewhere and put it on your expenses. I'll pay for everything.”

Katze wasn't sure what to say. Iason had never offered him time off before, not in all the years he had been working for him, not even when he had been the Blondie's furniture. “Are you...displeased with me, Iason?”

Iason spun around so quickly that Katze almost walked into him. “Why would you assume that?”

“It's just you've never mentioned my taking a vacation before. Do you think my failure to rescue you warrants additional training? I can...”

Iason dropped a hand on Katze's shoulder. “You did not fail me. I am offering you this as a reward, not as a punishment.”

He remembered how he'd tried to have a nice dinner on the balcony to reward Riki's behavior after Diman and his pet had left, Riki also had been suspicious. Was he really so heinous a master that those who belonged to him did not expect him to ever be kind? That was a troublesome thought.

“You have been of great service to me, Katze, as my aid and as a friend. This is my way of showing my gratitude for that service.”

“Oh.” Katze blinked slowly. “Okay.”

Iason started walking again and Katze followed. “By the way, I’ve agreed to lend your services to Raoul, he will probably be contacting you soon.”

Katze halted in his tracks, shocked. “What? Why the hell would you do that?” He watched Iason still and slowly turn back.

“Is there a problem?” Iason asked quietly.

“N...no, I just. I don’t know what kind of help I could be to him and I’ll have my hands full following up with all that’s happened in my absence.”

Iason tugged at his gloves, a sign of annoyance. “It seems he needs your assistance with an experiment and as a measure of my gratitude for his assistance with this recent situation I agreed. He is aware that your work for me comes first and you can only assist him when you are not busy.” His eyes rose and met Katze’s. “However, I expect you to have the same respect for him as you would any Blondie and not lie about your time to avoid going. Is that clear?”

“Yes.” Katze’s features returned to their usual stoic state. He didn’t want to be around Raoul, the Blondie made him nervous and he rarely got nervous about anything. So, this vacation was what? Like a last request? A moment to enjoy before the horror began? What the hell?

Iason continued to study his right-hand man and finally said. “I know Raoul can be difficult, but I am sure you can handle him.” When Katze remained silent, Iason continued. “This is a request, Katze, one I hope you will accept.” He didn’t want to make it an order, not after all they had been through together, but he would because he did owe Raoul.

Katze nodded, curtly. “I understand.” He would do anything for Iason, and the Blondie well knew it. “I apologize for my earlier reaction. It was just unexpected as Raoul can be...”

“Arrogant? Beastly? Frightening? Maddening?”

Katze chuckled before he could stop himself. “Yes.”

Iason clapped him on the back. “I have complete faith in your ability to keep him in line.”

They continued walking and Katze brought Iason up to speed regarding the people he had uncovered that instigated the plot against the Blondie and Riki. He assured Iason they most been appropriately dealt with and the others he would be moving on shortly.

“Iason?” Iason glanced at Katze. “About Cal.”

“Yes, Raoul informed me that he was still assisting him on some matters and would return home in a few days.”

“Is that all he told you?”

“What else is there?”

Katze fought with himself as to whether or not to explain Cal’s predicament. He didn’t want to betray Cal’s confidence, but he had never promised not to tell Iason and he felt Iason needed to know what happened, for Cal’s own sake. He had never lied to Iason, and his training forbid him to do so now.

“There is...more.”

Iason listened quietly as Katze gave him the details of what Bean had done and what had happened to Cal. The Blondie gave no visible reaction and when Katze finished his report, Iason turned away.

“Thank you for informing me. I understand why Raoul could not, having given his word.”

“What are you going to do?”

“What is necessary.” They arrived at Iason’s building and the Blondie turned to Katze once more. “I want you to take that time off, Katze. You may spend it however you wish, but you may not use it to conduct work, is that understood?”

“Yes. Thank you, Iason.”

“Will I see you at the ceremony tonight?”

“Regretfully I will be unable to attend.” Katze pulled a small package out of his jacket pocket. “Here is my gift, Good Joining, Iason.”

“Thank you, Katze.” Iason accepted the package, nodded once and then disappeared inside the building.

Katze turned away and tried not to wonder what would become of the Furniture named Bean. He’d prepare a list of new candidates for Iason as soon as possible.

Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

because it's almost Christmas...here's another Chapter!. Iason must join with Jupiter and he and Riki exchange gifts. Thank you all for the comments so far, please keep them coming as that is ALL I want for Christmas!

Riki opened the box containing the twin bracelets he had bartered from Carrie and slid his fingers across their smooth dark shape. It annoyed him how much he wanted the Blondie to like them. Iason had worn the broach he had given him every day, which caused Riki equal amounts of pleasure and discomfort.

It had only been a few hours since they returned from Avalon, and Iason had had been whisked away by Raoul upon the moment of their arrival. Riki had been content to return to the condo with Yiela, who spoke to him briefly about arranging a time to work on controlling his power, but as she was not used to space travel she complained of a bad stomach and headache and was now curled up on the sofa asleep.

Cal had not been at the condo, which was disappointing because Riki had been looking forward to seeing him, but Bean had been there and was being unusually pleasant and helpful. The Furniture had offered them food and drink and didn't seem to have any reaction to a woman accompanying Riki home. In fact, he quickly found a blanket and a pillow when Yiela said she was tired.

They had missed Junpein, the Day of Joining with Jupiter so Riki wasn't sure if he was still supposed to give Iason his gift. Looking at it now, especially after everything that had happened the last few days, it seemed a pretty juvenile gift. He chalked it up to the fact that he wasn't accustomed to buying gifts for anyone, such an extravagance was unheard of in Ceres. You never spent your effort on earning something for someone else. Granted, he had given Guy a gift to celebrate their pairing and had often made a deal to get Guy a part for his cycle, or certain foods when they

available because Guy liked to cook, but both were considered necessities and just what a pairing partner did. Beyond that Riki was not used to giving or receiving, so perhaps his selections for Iason were not what the Blondie was accustomed to.

While Riki would never openly admit it, his communication skills were not stellar, and even after all this time, he couldn't figure out what Iason was thinking. He had hoped that the mood bracelets he bartered from Carrie would help both of them understand one another better and possibly cut back on the hurt feelings and arguments. Not that Iason ever really fought with him, it was more Riki screaming or getting pissy and Iason taking control and instigating sex. Hardly a fight.

Still, if these bracelets worked the way they were supposed to, it might help get them both on the same page. Not that he intended to wear them all the time either, he didn't want Iason in his head any more than he wanted Jupiter, at least not constantly, but the offer was there, the ability that if things were going south they could use the bracelets to explain things that were being stunted verbally.

He glanced at the door, then plucked one of the bracelets out of its box and secured it over his wrist. The black started to soften into a kaleidoscope of color, pulling one shade from the other, then faded to deep green.

He dug the small note card out of the bottom of the box and read over the color chart based on the signature colour. "Anxious, nervous or restless. Fuck me." Well, he supposed that proved they worked.

He jumped up from the bed at a sound outside the bedroom door and the bracelet on his wrist turned to a soft pink. Struggling to get the bracelet off his wrist and back into the box, he dropped one of them on the floor and it rolled under the platform bed. Diving underneath it, his fingertips touched the rim of the bracelet, as the bedroom door opened and he spotted a pair of shiny black boots walking towards him.

He shoved the bracelet into the box, then the box into the bag, and tossed it up towards the right corner of the bed, just as a pair of strong hands gripped his ankles and pulled him out.

“Are you hiding from me?” Iason asked, amused as Riki immediately flipped over onto his back and sat up.

“No.” He shook his foot. “Let go.”

Iason complied and watched as Riki scrambled up then tried to drop nonchalantly onto the bed. “Why were you under the bed?”

“I’d never been under their before,” Riki tossed as he finally felt secure enough to lift his gaze. “I wanted to see what was...” His words died in his throat as his eyes widened in wonder.

Iason was a very beautiful being, with or without clothing, but seeing the Blondie now in his ceremonial regalia almost made Riki swallow his tongue. Iason wore black slacks with gold seams, a black tunic with gold ribbons and braiding around the wrists. Instead of his usual drape coat, he wore a long black cape that was gold underneath. He looked spectacularly sexy. His long blond hair was pulled back in a long intricate set of braids that created a woven plat down his back, with the exception of the jewelled strands that Jupiter had blessed him with, those remained free to tease his cheeks and fall over his shoulders.

“What is it?” Iason asked as he adjusted his black gloves.

“Huh?”

“You are staring, Riki.”

Riki wouldn’t have been surprised if Iason had told he was drooling either. “Um...yeah, you...you look really...” Hot. Erotic. Dashing. Gorgeous. “Different.”

“Different?” Iason asked leaned down and caressed Riki’s cheek, affectionately. Raoul had prepared his regalia and brought it to his office so that Iason could change as they discussed important matters. “I wish we had the time to explore that difference.” The blatant hunger in Riki’s eyes was almost enough to convince Iason to blow off his union with Jupiter. “However, I must attend my joining at once.”

“Oh! You...I thought you missed that?”

“I did, which is why I must go now. The ceremony itself is over, but I must still join with Jupiter to properly align my cycle for the next year.”

“Oh.” Riki thought about the box under the bed. “I guess Jupiter would probably be pretty pissed if you passed her up just to get laid.”

“Indeed. Now, why aren’t you dressed?”

“I am dressed.” Riki looked down at the usual black jeans and T-Shirt he’d changed into when they arrived home. “Your eyes not working?”

“You aren’t going to wear that to see me off, are you?”

“See you off?”

Iason caught Riki’s chin and leaned down close. “The gift exchange, of course, before I go in got the joining. You did buy me a gift, did you not?”

“I...but you said we missed it!”

“Yes, but the traditions remain the same. I must go to my joining with Jupiter and so all requirements must properly be allotted. The ceremony itself will not be public, of course, but a private gathering is allowed, given the circumstances, and this includes the gift exchange.” He held up the gift box that Katze had given him, which had been the black gloves he now wore. “I am wearing my gift from Katze, now where is yours? Or do you wish to wait until we attend the ceremony?”

Riki couldn’t help the flicker of excitement and then dread that tingled through him. Part of him wanted to go, to share this occasion with Iason and prove that he was making the effort and because he was curious about what went on at this sort of thing. Another part, the bigger part, feared the scorn and derision he would receive as a pet being a part of the gift exchange, even if it was a private one.

“That’s probably not a good idea,” he muttered. “Aren’t we supposed to be keeping a low profile?”

“I think that method has been effectively blown considering what has recently happened.” Iason settled on the bed next to Riki. “I would like you to be with me, Riki.” He cupped Riki’s cheek, smiled when Riki turned to his touch. “On this day, in this moment, I do not care what others think of us. Jupiter has decreed you may come, and I wish for you to be there. I wish to share this special moment with the person that I love.”

Riki’s heart was pounding in his chest at Iason’s sincerity but then doubt crept in. “I...Are you sure?” he asked quietly. “I mean...about this...about me.”

“What sort of question is that?” Iason scowled and he gripped Riki’s arm. “Are you still thinking my feelings are a result of your genetic power?”

Riki shrugged and lowered his eyes. “It would explain...a lot.”

“Riki.” Iason pulled him into his embrace. “We have already established that I am not subject to chemical or pheromonal changes. The power you have cannot affect me.”

“Maybe it’s not chemical? Maybe it’s something else entirely, even I don’t know what it is. If it causes people to like me...to want me, how do you know it isn’t why you like me so much too? Yielia said people can’t help it that they’re affected, so doesn’t that mean they’re not responsible for what they do because of it? What if there’s really nothing to me and it’s all just this...” He broke off and shook his head,

Iason had a sudden realization, was Riki insecure? He didn’t see how that was possible. Riki was the most arrogant, confident and proud Human he had ever met. It was unthinkable that the mongrel did not recognize his own self worth. Had learning his origins damaged his mongrel pride? This was a very disturbing idea and one that angered Iason against the people of Avalon.

“Why do you believe that my love for you is insincere?”

“It’s just, it never made sense, not really.” Riki lifted his gaze to look up at the Blondie. “I’m a mongrel from Ceres. I’m not pretty or accommodating.

I fought you at every turn. I can sort of see when I was younger, but now... it just doesn't make sense." What did make sense is that it had nothing to do with him and everything to do with this supposed power he had, that he had no knowledge of until recently.

"Riki." Iason slid his hand over Riki's hair in a soothing gesture. "I can list the things I love about you, but I should not need to. Before I loved you, I wanted you because you fascinated me when you seemed unimpressed by my status. The fact that you were brazen enough to offer your body spoke of your confidence and self-respect. If any other mongrel had done the same I would have looked at them as simply a whore and a nuisance, but you were different. That was what drew me to you, what continues to draw me to you."

Riki shook his head. "I still don't get it."

"Well, let me ask you, why do you love me?"

Riki blinked, he'd never expected to be asked that question. How could he answer it when he wasn't entirely sure himself? "You made me do it."

Iason's hand reached around and pinched Riki's ass hard enough to make him yelp.

"I don't know, okay! I'm still figuring it out."

"My point is that what we feel for each other is real and not due in part to some alien power of persuasion."

"I guess, I just...All of this is so messed up."

"I know, but we will get through it. Don't worry." He pulled Riki into his arms again for a hard hug, then pulled back again. "Now, shall we go together and show them all we are not afraid? We can start our own traditions and to hell with the rest of them."

Riki's lips twitched into the beginnings of a smile, but his anxiousness caused it to fade again immediately. "Iason..."

How could he explain how he felt about this? How torn he was about going and about staying? He did want to go, and he could handle the stares and rude comments, but he honestly didn't want to embarrass Iason. Although they missed the actual celebration day, this was obviously just as important to Iason. It was his first time worrying over such a thing.

"So...you're going to sleep again?"

"Not exactly, but similar."

Riki's hands curled into fists against his jeans. "But...you'll wake up, right?"

Iason caught Riki's chin and lifted it, caught Riki's lingering fear and uncertainty before the mongrel pulled away and lowered his eyes. "Are you worried?"

"No!"

Riki was still confused and angry over the questions of his origin, still exhausted from the abduction to Avalon and, above all else, still stinging from the fear of losing the Elite when Iason had gone into the Deep Sleep previously. He wanted to explain all of that and yet, he couldn't. His pride simply wouldn't allow it.

His eyes flickered to the bed, then back to Iason's gentle gaze. "Can I give you your gift now?"

"Then you won't come with me?"

"I will." The words were out before he had made the decision, but being a proud mongrel, he refused to retract them. "I will," he repeated firmly. "I just don't want to give it to you in front of everyone else."

Iason nodded, watched as Riki dropped to his knees and reached half his body in under the bed. "As you like." So that was what Riki had been doing earlier, he mused, hiding something under the bed. "I have a gift for you also, but it will be at the ceremony."

“That’s fine.” Riki straightened. “It’s not really much, or anything you have to like, so if you don’t like it, be honest and tell me, but...well...anyway...” He hesitated, then awkwardly shoved the gift bag forward. “Here.”

Iason willed himself not to laugh, as Riki’s format for gift giving seemed the same as when he received the broach. He dipped his hand into the bag and pulled out the box. After a quick glance at his lover, he pulled up the lid and stared at the twin black bracelets. “They’re lovely, Riki.” He didn’t usually wear such adornments, but it was the thought that counted, which was the reason he wore his broach so often. “And they will match my regalia perfectly.”

“No!” Riki flushed as Iason glanced at him startled. “I mean...yeah, they will but...They’re not both for you.”

“I’m not sure I understand....”

Riki reached into the box, pulled out one of the bracelets and slipped it over his wrist. “We each get one, like our rings,” he insisted quickly. “And they change color, see?” He lifted his wrist to reveal the bracelet, expecting it to turn green again, then quickly covering it when it morphed into the dreaded pink. “Shit. No, this...I mean...”

Iason’s hand shot out and gripped Riki’s wrist to study the bracelet. “How is it doing that?” he asked, fascinated, then looked down at the black bracelet still in the box. “What does it mean to change color?”

“It...It means...” Riki tried to claw the bracelet off but Iason’s grip wouldn’t allow it. Shit. SHIT! This was backfiring so badly. He hadn’t realized he’d feel so exposed like this! “C...Can you just put the damn thing on too?” Maybe it wouldn’t be as bad if Iason’s emotions were revealed as well.

Sensing Riki would bolt if he released him, Iason held out his hand. “You put it on me.”

Grumbling, Riki managed to push back Iason’s sleeve and fasten the second bracelet over the Blondie’s wrist one handed. He held his breath, waiting

for it to change color, and when it didn't he started to scowl.

"Yours is changing again!" Iason commented as he watched Riki's bracelet merge into a bright orange. Spotting the small card in the bottom of the box, he picked it up with his free hand. "Oh. It registers your emotions. This color means you are confused or discontented." Iason smiled. "How extraordinary! Is that really how you are feeling, Riki?"

Horried, Riki managed to wrestle his wrist away and snatched the bracelet off. "It doesn't work," he muttered and tossed the bracelet onto the bed.

"It's working perfectly, according to this chart." Iason picked up the discarded bracelet. "Put it back on, I'd like to see it change again."

"It doesn't work on *you*!" Riki exclaimed, and Iason didn't need a color chart to know that the mongrel was angry.

Iason looked down on the black bracelet on his wrist. "Oh. Well, no, it wouldn't. I imagine they work with your body chemistry, and only my mind is organic."

Riki flopped down on the bed and dropped his head in his hands. "I'm an idiot."

He'd forgotten when he purchased the bracelets that Iason was an android! How the hell could he forget that? What a stupid, naive, childish idea for a gift. A Blondie had a Human-like body, but they weren't Human, so of course the bracelets wouldn't work.

He was so lost in his own self-pity that he didn't notice Iason moving until two strong arms slid around him.

"Will you tell me why you chose this gift, Riki?" the Blondie asked softly.

Riki shook his head, but leaned into Iason's embrace, hiding his steaming face against the soft cloth of Iason's tunic. "It doesn't matter. They don't work."

"If they had worked, what did you hope to accomplish?"

Riki shrugged. "I just...I thought they might help us...you know...communicate better, somehow." He pulled away, ran his hands through his hair. "It was a stupid idea."

"No." Iason caught Riki's chin and pulled him in for a sweet, but brief kiss. "It was a very good, a very thoughtful idea." He slid the bracelet back onto Riki's wrist, watched it go from black, to red, to pink and finally to a rich purple. Leaning his forehead against Riki's, he ran a gloved finger over the bracelet. "Do you know what this color means, my love?"

Riki shook his head, he hadn't had the chance to memorize the chart, unlike Iason who had probably done so at one glance.

"It means you are aroused." Iason his other hand lower to cup Riki's groin. "It is surprisingly accurate."

"Fuck off." Riki slapped Iason's hand away and pushed back, but his lips were twitching. "You said we didn't have time for that."

"We'll make time."

Iason freed Riki within seconds, dropped to his knees and then engulfed the mongrel's erection with his mouth.

"W...wait!" Riki protested, and then moaned as he dug his fingers into Iason's shoulders. Good. So fucking good! He didn't know where Iason learned to suck someone off but he was so amazing at it and Riki was close to release in just a few minutes. "Slow...can't...nuuhhh!"

"Come for me, Riki."

That was all it took, Iason's voice, Iason's permission, and Riki was gushing into the Blondie's mouth. Even as he gasped for breath, he watched Iason rise and remove the nearly invisible fasteners to the front of his trousers. "We can't..." Riki began as he was pushed down on the bed, then he arched in pleasure as Iason entered him.

“We can,” Iason assured in a low, sexy voice as he rammed into Riki over and over again. “It will just have to be quick.”

Quick? Fuck-God! Yes! Quick, quick would be great, Riki thought as Iason’s speed increased, along with his own pleasure. Then there was no time to speak, no time to think as they both reached their new pinnacle together and dove head first over it.

Before Riki could even think about recovering, he was in Iason’s embrace again.

“Riki, thank you.”

“For... what?” Riki panted back.

“For trying to bring us closer together. For being so sweet, and lovely.”

“Stop saying that! I’m not any of that and if you keep on about it I’ll kick your ass.”

Iason chuckled and held onto Riki, even as he struggled to break free. “I love my gift. Thank you.”

Riki’s anger and frustration released and he let himself be held. “They’re useless now, though.”

“No, not useless. With this, I can still understand what you are feeling, and that *is* important.”

“But I’ll still have no clue about your feelings! What’s the point of only one of us being that way? It’s not fair!”

“No, it isn’t.” Iason kissed Riki’s forehead, eyes, nose and then lips. “So I will endeavor to better explain to you how I am feeling as a trade, alright?”

“Whatever.” Riki shrugged but was satisfied with the compromise, for now. He shoved his hips up, reminding Iason that they were still intimately connected. “Weren’t we going somewhere?”

Reluctantly, Iason moved back and stared at Riki's now stained shirt. "Well, you won't be able to wear this."

Riki sat up and shrugged out of the shirt. "You did that on purpose!"

Iason ruffled Riki's hair as he adjusted his clothing. "Actually, you did that, to yourself."

"Because of you!" Riki threw the shirt at Iason, who caught it then tossed it over his shoulder and enjoyed the view of a naked Riki on his back, braced upwards on his elbows and wearing just his biker boots. "What am I supposed to wear to this thing now?"

"You have an entire wardrobe of clothes, Riki."

"I'm not wearing pet clothes!"

"Then it's probably best if you wear something else." Iason entered their walk-in closet. "Would you like me to select something for you or would you prefer to choose for yourself?"

Riki knew nothing about putting clothes together, but he would never admit that. His own clothes were easier, black and black, but when you threw colors into the mix, he just didn't understand how to match them. Usually, Cal would put his clothes out for him whenever Iason wanted to take him somewhere, but he refused to allow Bean to do it.

"When are we leaving?" he asked as he toed off his boots and wandered, unsteadily into the bathroom to clean up. Bean had said that Cal was off doing errands so he didn't expect the boy to be back in time to help. Although, it seemed odd that Cal had been gone for so long.

"We have less than twenty minutes, so you should dress now. Do you need a bath first?"

"I had a shower!" Riki defended then discretely sniffed himself. "Do I stink?"

Iason stepped out of the closet with a handful of garments and looked around for his wayward mongrel. “Not at all, but I know that baths relax you.” He set down two shirts, one a deep crimson, the other a bright white with shimmers of blue running through it. “Come and see which one of these you like better?”

Riki returned from the washroom, pulled out a pair of briefs, then shrugged into them as he glanced at the shirts. “They’re both too bright.”

“You can’t wear black all the time, Riki.”

“You’re wearing black.”

Iason opened his mouth, recalculated then closed it again. “Fine.” He returned to the closet, and as he rummaged called out. “You do know that this is what Furniture are for, to help you dress?”

“What’s your point?” Riki called back, petulantly.

Iason leafed through the assortment of clothing he had purchased for Riki. It was rather enjoyable to choose clothes for his pet...his lover, he corrected mentally. He really had to stop doing that. If he said it aloud, Riki would be so angry. He smirked as he thought of the bracelets. Yes, they would come in very handy indeed.

Selecting a pair of dark trousers, since Riki did like black, he was surprised to also find a black shirt with gold patterns across the front at the very back of the closet. Stepping out, he steeled himself at the sight of Riki, now in just his socks and black briefs.

“No time,” he muttered to himself, absolutely no time. “How about this?” He set the clothes on the bed. “Then we can match. What do you think?”

“I guess.” Riki grabbed the pants and slid into them, then held his arms out as Iason held up the shirt for him.

Once dressed, Iason clasped Riki’s new bracelet around the mongrel’s left wrist as he was wearing the silver one on his right, then he started to pin on

the broach Riki had given him.

“No,” Riki said and took it away from the Blondie. “It doesn’t match what you’re wearing.”

“But you gave it to me and I wish to wear it, Riki.”

“You don’t have to wear it all the time, Iason.”

Iason studied the uncomfortable expression on his pet and reached for the extra black bracelet. “I will wear this instead, then.”

“It doesn’t work on you...”

“That is irrelevant. I am wearing the gloves that Katze gave me and I will wear something you have given me as well, so what is it to be, the broach or the bracelet.”

“You...You already have the ring on,” Riki said quietly and if Iason didn’t know better he would almost say, shyly.

“That is entirely different.” Iason snapped the bracelet on over his wrist then caught Riki’s arm. “Come, we are running late and will have to hurry.”

“Fine.”

Bean was at the door waiting and offered Riki his leather jacket, but Iason took the jacket, gave it to Riki and wordlessly waved Bean away. They took the elevator down to the lobby where a car was waiting to take them to Jupiter’s tower. Once there, they were escorted into the tower, and then strangely, out to the courtyard behind the building. There Raoul and several other Elites waited, among a few servers with platters of food and a small table of gifts.

“Iason.” Raoul, now dressed in a similar outfit to Iason’s only his in green and gold, was the first to greet them. He placed a hand on Iason’s shoulder, while Iason reciprocated the gesture on Raoul’s shoulder. “My brother, as one of thirteen, for thirteen of one.”

Riki listened as Iason repeated the greeting solemnly and noticed that the other Elites were dressed formally, but not in the same kind of regalia. They too stepped forward and offered the standard greeting.

Iason turned back to Raoul. "Have you not already joined with Jupiter?"

"I had but was pulled out due to your misadventure. Jupiter has kindly agreed to submerge me again."

"I see. I will be glad for the company." Iason had not wanted to go into it alone and was pleased that he would at least have Raoul.

By tradition, all Elites should have been present, even though it was just Raoul and Iason submerging, but Iason made no comment as he knew from Raoul's report why there were a few of their brothers missing from the ceremony.

"I am eager to get it over and done."

"Are you?"

"I can see that there is much to catch up on while I was away."

"There is that, yes." Raoul finally turned to Riki, who had been ignored by the other Blondies and offered him the glass he held in his hand. "You look tired, pet. Shall I offer you a pick me up?"

Riki crossed his arms over his chest. "No thanks." Like he would ingest anything Raoul gave him. "Have you seen Cal?"

"Cal was assisting me with some matters while you were away and is just finishing up some work. He will return to home in a few days."

"Oh."

"Iason."

Iason turned at the sound of his name and excused himself to go and accept gifts from his brothers. He, in turn, offered them the gifts he had intended

for the original Joining.

“I understand you brought back a souvenir,” Raoul said to Riki.

Riki grunted. “Sort of.”

“An alien girl from this world of yours. I hear she is quite beautiful, and even has a similar complexion to your own. More and more Elites are asking for that kind of complexion in a pet. Perhaps...”

“No.” Riki glared at Raoul. “Don’t you...” He lowered his voice when he saw Iason glance their way. “Don’t you even think about it, Raoul.”

Raoul smirked, pleased to have gotten a rise out of the mongrel. “That’s better, your color is back up.”

“Wha...” Riki sputtered as Iason returned to them, just as the sound of a long, vibrating bell sounded. “What’s that?”

“It’s time to go in,” Iason said. “You and the others may continue to visit, Raoul and I will head up. But before that, I need to give you your gift.”

Iason took Riki’s hand and guided him down the steps of the patio through the intricate courtyard and around to the side where Riki’s gift waited.

Riki stumbled to a halt and his hand slipped from Iason’s. “Iason.” His throat closed up and his eyes teared at the absolute fucking irony.

“Cal suggested it, he said you were quite taken by it.” Iason frowned, he had expected the air-bike to make Riki smile, but his pet looked ready to cry instead. “Did I purchase the incorrect model? This was the one in the window.”

Riki shook his head, unable to speak as he walked slowly towards the machine that Guy had designed and built. He ran his hand over the leather seat and caressed the handlebars. It was beautiful, he thought, and exactly as he and Guy had dreamed of as they huddled together for warmth in the cold seasons of the slums. It had been a dream that he had forgotten about, a dream he had turned his back on long before he had turned his back on his

friend. But Guy had succeeded, he had managed to make their dream into a reality, just like he had said in the letter, and wasn't that just fucking amazing?

"Why are you giving me this?" he asked quietly. Didn't Iason realize that by giving him this Riki could run? Didn't he understand what this kind of gift would signify a chance at freedom?

"I wished you to have something you truly wanted."

Iason wanted to turn Riki back to him, hoping that those dark obsidian eyes might give him a hint of what Riki was thinking. Riki was very good at hiding his emotions, other than anger, and only ever allowed a sliver of what he was really thinking and feeling to show through. His body was much more honest of course, but Iason realized he could not always depend on just Riki's body to understand his beloved.

He couldn't see the mood bracelet beneath Riki's jacket sleeve and so he could not tell what Riki's emotional state was. Perhaps this was an error in judgement. Perhaps Riki had not gotten over his need to be free and Iason had just furnished Riki with the perfect way to escape. He tried to swallow the urge to take the man he loved and run, away from Tanagura, away from Jupiter and Guy and everything that could steal Riki away from him.

"You never wear the clothes I buy you or any of the jewelry except for that one simple bracelet."

"I wear the ring," Riki added quietly.

"Yes, and that pleases me." Iason took a step forward, found it odd to be feeling this awkward with Riki. If he said the wrong thing now, Riki may well and truly run. "I wished to give you something that pleased you as much as you have pleased me." Iason reached for Riki's jacket sleeve and pushed it up to see that the bracelet had turned to a deep blue. "Although it seems I have failed and you are not pleased."

"I'm not...displeased."

“This color means sorrow. I have hurt you somehow.”

“No.” Riki shook his head and finally turned to look up at Iason. “You read Guy’s letter.”

“Yes.”

“You know he built this bike, or at least designed it as one we both dreamed about?”

“I was aware he was building air-cycles, I was not aware this was one of his or the one he spoke of in his letter.”

“I’m sad because...because of what could have been and wasn’t. I’m sad because this bike reminds me of Guy, our time together, and everything that went wrong to fuck that up.”

“I see.” Iason could feel the spike of jealousy rip through him and tried to contain it. “That was certainly not my intention.”

“Knowing it’s the bike Guy created, knowing that fact makes me think about him and what we were together...do you still want to give it to me?” Wasn’t Iason jealous of Guy, of anything that he and Riki had shared? First the letter and now this, was Iason really going to risk him running?

Iason wanted to say no, was on the verge of doing so, but he felt as if this was suddenly a very important moment for them. He had told Riki repeatedly that he trusted him, but he had never really proven that fact. If anything, he had shown Riki his insecurity far too often.

“Yes.”

Riki glanced up again at Iason’s quiet response and saw that the Blondie’s eyes had changed to that mesmerizing color of liquid gold. He wondered what exactly the color meant and if Iason’s eyes, in a way, revealed his mood or emotions. He glanced down at the black bracelet that Iason had insisted on wearing, even though it didn’t work on the Blondie.

He reached for Iason’s hand, caressed the bracelet. “Keep your promise.”

“Promise?”

Riki lifted his eyes to Iason's. “Tell me what you're feeling, what you're really feeling.”

Iason tilted his head and a small, wistful smile appeared. “I am concerned,” he admitted. “I purchased this gift for you believing you would truly be pleased, but it was a difficult decision. It became more so when I read Guy's letter, and then the kidnapping and discovery of your home planet and people. Learning that this gift will make you think of him was not something I had anticipated.” He caught both of Riki's hands in his, unaccustomed to having to explain himself, but he had promised. “I am trying Riki. I do not want to give you such freedom, but I cannot keep you from it any longer.”

Riki considered all the years he had fought to be free and had always been denied. There had been a time when that was all he had wanted, because it was the one thing Iason would not give him. Now, in less than a year he had been given the opportunity to gain his freedom not once, but twice and had refused it. He'd had his reasons of course, though he was still confused about some of them.

Riki had refused his chance at freedom before and had stayed by Iason's side, had even tried to protect him, and this gave the Blondie hope that despite all their problems in the past, Riki had really and finally chosen him. He had to take this chance, had to know if what he believed was true or if it was just his desire making it seem so.

Riki had come back to him to keep his friends and ex-lover safe. Perhaps also because his body was now addicted to Iason's touch and training, but Riki had chosen to stay even after they recovered from death. He had chosen to return to Amoï instead of remaining on Avalon. Iason chose not to believe that Riki's decision was not only based on their physical relationship. He chose not to believe that he had broken Riki enough for the mongrel to not know his own mind anymore and to make a choice he did not truly want.

“And what about Guy?” Riki asked.

“It seems regardless of my attempts I cannot stop you from thinking of Guy. I will, however, continue to fight him for you, should we ever meet again. I will never give you back to him, Riki, you must know this.”

Riki did know this, and it no longer bothered him as it once had. “And if I run?” he asked. “If I ride away never to be seen again while you’re sleeping.” Fascinated, Riki watched the gold in Iason’s eyes turn even brighter and for a moment it was as if he was looking into the sun itself. Fear, he realized, this color meant fear or anxiety for the Blondie.

“You gave me your word,” the Blondie replied calmly, despite the turmoil going on inside of him. “I will trust you not to break it.”

“And if I do, you’ll chase me, right?” Riki grew concerned when Iason did not echo the words he had offered on the ship back from Avalon. “So...I guess you still need me to say it.” He glanced at the bike, then back at Iason. “Well, I...” He was startled when Iason put a gloved finger to his lips.

“Don’t.”

Iason did not want a promise that Riki may not be able to keep, he no longer wanted to hold Riki here out of obligation. He had developed a difficult realization while on Avalon, there was somewhere else the mongrel could run to; someone else who wanted him. Iason had depended on the fact that Riki’s only choice was him, or life as a mongrel back in Ceres; which no sane person would choose. He’d held that threat over Riki’s head for years, was so sure of his reasoning that he set Riki free, sure that the mongrel would be back within a week begging to be a pet again. And yet after almost a year Riki did not seem to show any sign of returning. Iason realized then that Riki truly might just remain in the slums, that he preferred such a wretched, uncertain life to the comfort and ease of being a pet. And so, Iason had needed a new threat; that was when he had hatched his plan to destroy Bison. That had worked for awhile, but he could see that Riki hated being back in Eos and so he’d allowed him to go back to work for Katze.

Iason had tried so many things to keep Riki with him, imprisonment, torture, manipulation, sex and emotional abuse. Had chased after him to

bring him back from the slums, and then again when Guy had kidnapped Riki. The Blondie was incapable of letting Riki be with anyone but him.

Things changed for them both after Dana Bahn. Riki seemed willing to stay and yet Iason still felt as if Riki's choice was because of some perceived threat. He wished for Riki to stay, truly stay of his own free will. He wanted to be Riki's real and final choice, and to do that, he had to give Riki the option of an alternative without negotiations or repercussions.

"If you are here when I wake, then I will be pleased beyond measure. If you are not..." He left the rest unsaid, and instead brought Riki's hand to his lips. If Riki was not there to greet him when he woke, it would be better not to wake at all.

Riki blinked, then slowly nodded. "Okay."

Iason leaned down and kissed him so sweetly that tears pooled in Riki's eyes, and then Iason was moving towards the portal where Raoul stood waiting.

Iason turned just as he reached the gateway that would carry him to Jupiter's chamber, and held Riki's gaze until the very last moment when the portal moved him to his creator's inner sanctum. As Riki's form faded and was replaced by solid white walls, Iason felt the tightness in his chest again.

He stepped out beside Raoul and began to remove his clothing, offering it to the Furnitures who were there to keep it tidy until their return.

The last thing Iason removed was his ring, he closed his fist over it as his eyes squeezed shut. Naked, he walked with his brother to the Transmersion Chamber and stepped into a room that was filled from floor to ceiling with cylindrical cubicles.

Iason stepped into the one closest to him, felt it rotate and then was conscious only of warmth filling him, as his eyes closed and he prepared to be joined with Jupiter.

On the table, outside of the Transmersion chamber, upon the tray where Iason had placed his belongings, a small smudge of gray was just starting to disappear across the bracelet Riki had given him, until it faded completely to black.

Chapter 3

Summary for the Chapter:

Shiao and Guy are back home

Guy stood on the balcony of Shiao's condo and stared out over the rows of trees that bordered a mountainous ridge beyond. The view did not compare to the natural openness of nature that he had seen on Avalon, but it was still a stark comparison to the flat lands and slum cities of Ceres. They had returned just two days ago and he had already resumed work at the bike shop, but his heart just wasn't in it. He couldn't get Riki's final words out of his head, or the fact that his friend was an actual Prince.

He didn't comprehend the full extent of it all but he'd always known Riki was different, that he was special. There had always been something about Riki that set him above the other guys in Ceres, but Guy had never suspected that Riki was not a mongrel. Learning that not only was Riki from an alien race and a different planet, but that he was also royalty would have been inconceivable, had he not been there to witness it himself. Despite the discovery that Riki was actually a Prince, his friend had chosen to remain the pet of a Blondie. Guy just didn't get that, even though he'd been forced to accept it. Riki had made it plain that they could have nothing more to do with each other.

They had both come a long way from the slums of Ceres, and while Guy felt his life had turned out better working for Shiao, he still hated that Riki felt he belonged to Iason Mink. Keeping Riki the Dark for a pet was incomprehensible, but keeping a Prince as well? Only a Blondie would be so fucking arrogant. Guy sighed. Riki really seemed to want to be with Iason, claimed that he actually loved the Elite. He didn't know if it was brainwashing or Riki's true feelings, but he'd promised to respect it.

As for himself, he'd returned with Shiao and would resume his duties here, companion to the Onyx and mechanic in the bike shop. It was a better existence than the one he led in Ceres, but it still felt empty somehow. He

wasn't sure if that was because Riki would never be a part of it, or because something inside Guy had changed.

He'd been reasonably content before, but now something was different. Perhaps it was knowing how very insignificant he was in the grand scheme of things. He didn't have the power or prestige of an Elite and he didn't have the pride or strength of Riki the Dark. He was just Guy, street mongrel, former friend and pairing partner of Riki The Dark. He was no one

He slid his fingers around the small thumb-sized medallion that hung on a chain around his neck. It was the only thing he had from his former life because Katze had not removed it from his neck before he'd had his mind wiped. It seemed a lifetime ago now when he had traded for the pair of medallions, which he had chosen to use as a celebration gift when Riki had asked him to be his pairing partner. It had only cost him a quick fuck by Bruiser, one of the merchant dealers in the west end of Ceres as that had been the only trade the giant had been willing to make. While the large man hadn't been brutal with him, he'd been abnormally large everywhere and Guy had trouble sitting for several days afterwards.

It had been worth it though, the smile on Riki's face when he'd given him one of the medallions and revealed his matching one was one of Guy's favorite memories. At first Riki laughed and teased him, but he could tell that Riki really liked it because his friend had not taken it off after that time, even when they had sex or to shower. His hand tightened around the medallion, he hadn't seen the necklace on Riki's neck when he'd returned to Ceres after three years away, but Guy supposed that Mink had taken it.

He pulled hard enough to break the chain and then stared at the medallion in his hand. His and Riki's relationship was over. Riki never wanted to see him again and Guy had made that stupid promise to let go and forget about him. Iason had taken everything from him, he still hated the Blondie, yet he could see that Riki wasn't being treated as badly as he'd originally thought. Mink seemed very protective of Riki, so Guy supposed he would have to be content with that.

Curling his fingers over the medallion, he reared his arm back as if to throw, then just held it there, unable to complete the action. He stared out over the trees as the sun slowly started to set and warm, soft colors ran across the sky. Come on, just toss it. Throw it and be done with it. His hand clenched tighter and he pulled the medallion to his chest.

It needed to be done, he needed to purge Riki from his system, and yet... and yet. He sighed and hung his head. It seemed he really was useless. Riki had severed their relationship permanently and Guy accepted why Riki felt he had to do that. Guy had given Riki more than enough reason to never want to see him again, but even now he couldn't seem to rid himself of everything that reminded him of Riki.

“Shit.”

“Do you require assistance?”

Guy glanced behind him as Shiao stepped up to him. “Hey.”

“You are disturbed.”

“Yeah.” He saw no point in lying about it, the Onyx had an uncanny ability to read his every emotion; just like Riki had. Or maybe he just has an expressive face.

“Can I do anything to assist you?”

“Tell me to forget about Riki and my life before and throw this stupid thing away.”

Shiao promptly repeated the words verbatim and Guy's lips twitched. “Did that help?”

“No.”

Shiao stepped closer so they were both leaning against the railing. “Do you know why?”

“Yeah, because I'm a fucking coward.”

“No.” Shiao placed his hand over Guy’s closed fist and watched the mongrel’s fingers slowly open. He pulled out the chain. “Because this is important to you.”

“He told me to forget about him. It’s part of him. He never wants to see me again. He...he made me promise that I won’t ever try to be with him again, so I should get rid of it. Right?”

Guy hated that his voice cracked with emotion on the last word.

“That is illogical.”

“Huh?”

“Riki cannot be part of your future, but he will always be part of your past. You lost your past once, do you truly wish to lose it again?”

Guy thought about how terrifying it was to wake up and have no memories of who he was and where he belonged. Then, when he started to remember, the truth of what he had done, what he had lost hit him horribly hard, and that was even worse. He shuddered. Still, it was probably because Katze had only been a partial wipe that he’d managed to regain most of his memories. Now, part of him wished he could forget them again.

“You loved him.”

“Yes.” Guy glanced at Shiao. “Do you...understand that?”

“I recognize the concept of love in regards to it’s social connotation, but I do not comprehend the feelings attached to it or why Humans feel the need to participate in it at regular intervals.”

“Mink seems to think he does. He says he loves Riki.”

“Yes. That was surprising, however Iason was designed to surpass all of us, so perhaps not as shocking after all.”

“What do you mean?”

“It does not matter. We are discussing you, are we not? I know that Iason is not your favorite subject.”

“*That*, you understand.” He groaned and hung his head in his hands. “I don’t know what to do. I don’t want to forget Riki, but I have to. It hurts so much to think about Riki, about what I did to him but it hurts even more to think I’ll never see him again. I don’t want to feel like this anymore.”

“If Riki had died at Dana Bahn, would you be struggling like this?”

“No. Yes. Maybe.” Guy laughed weakly at his own inability to decide. “I don’t know.”

“When you thought he was dead, you seemed to have moved on, had you not?”

Had he, Guy wondered? He was struggling with his own issues then, the memory wipe, trying to find work, trying to survive. But when he had started to remember yes, his first thought had been for Riki. His first memories in fact had been what he had done to Riki. He searched for news of Riki but found none and when he read about the explosion in Dana Bahn and that Iason Mink as well as his pet had gone missing and his heart died.

Then the guilt that forced him to see his old pairing partner everywhere and he believed that he was losing his mind. When he had seen Riki with the red head who he remembered from when he woke up in the hospital, his obsession for Riki returned. Shiao had introduced him to Orphe, a Blondie who seemed to understand that Riki did not belong as the pet and who also had a grudge against Iason Mink. He’d been foolish to believe he could control the situation, and Riki had once again been hurt because of his foolishness. It had taken Riki’s threat that he really would shoot Guy to break Guy from his obsession and see things as they really were. It had been a hard lesson to learn and he’d truly thought he’d moved past it, but then he saw Riki again and all that shit came crawling back.

“We must all live with the consequences of our actions, Guy.”

Guy was pulled out of his self-incrimination when Shiao spoke and looked up at the Onyx as if suddenly remembering he was there. “Huh?”

“You are suffering from grief and remorse which seems more powerful in this moment because you’ve received resolution but not absolution.”

“What does that mean?”

“Riki has decided what the fate of your relationship will be, and you were not included in that decision. You wished for a different outcome, yet you have accepted his solution, as you must.”

“But...”

“If you do not accept it you will do something foolish again, Guy, something that may hurt you and your friend further. Do you wish that?”

“No.” Guy shook his head. “I do want him to be happy. I really do, I just...”

“Just?”

“I want to...I want to be happy too. Why can’t I be happy too? Why does he get to live in the lap of fucking luxury and have someone love him, even if it is a fucking Blondie? Why does he get everything good? I mean, he’s even a Prince for...” Guy gasped as he realized what he was saying and his eyes darted up towards Shiao’s. “I...I don’t mean...I mean, I know he’s had a bad time of it. I never meant that he didn’t suffer or anything, or that he doesn’t deserve it or...”

“He has a life now that is more comfortable than what he had in Ceres, but it is not the life he had wished for himself, given what you have told me about him.”

Shiao had never thought about whether a pet would want to be a pet before he had met Guy. He had never considered another’s thoughts or feelings before he acted, until recently. He glanced out over the trees, noticed that the sky had turned a deep violet, and soon it would darken to pitch with the oncoming night. He had watched the sun set thousands of times, in

hundreds of different places, and it never affected him as this one seemed to.

To watch the sun set with a companion, a friend, seemed more alluring and more real. He could appreciate the beauty of it, the wonder and also the peace that it offered. This was all because of the man who stood beside him, the wayward mongrel he had felt a stirring of pity for and decided to take under his wing. He no longer pitied Guy, instead such thoughts were left for himself, for he would never be as close to Guy as this Riki had been. He could never be more than he was, and that would never be enough for Guy.

“Shiao?”

Shiao blinked and returned his attention to their discussion, picking up exactly where he had left off as if he had not allowed his thoughts to carry him away.

“Riki may not have wanted that life, but now he has come to terms with it. He has accepted that life and no doubt understands that he is better off in many ways because of it. You do not envy his life, merely his acceptance of it and his willingness to continue. He has found his resolution and his place in the world. Is that what you meant to say?”

“Yeah.” Sort of. Guy wondered how Shiao could sound so elegant when saying basically saying the same thing while he had sounded like an imbecile. “Yeah, that’s what I mean, I didn’t mean...I’m not jealous of him or anything! I mean, I don’t want to be a Blondie’s pet!”

Shiao nodded complacently. “It has only been a couple of days since we have returned, Guy.” He placed a firm hand on the mongrel’s shoulder. “Your feelings are still in turmoil. Do you worry what you might do if you see Riki again?”

Guy nodded, stunned at how much the Onyx seemed to understand feelings that he was still struggling with.

“Well, I do not foresee a reason for us to visit Amoī any time soon, and so the chances of you meeting Riki again is minimal. Take your time with

whatever decisions you feel are necessary and allow your feelings to run their due course.”

Guy took a deep breath, exhaled and straightened. “Yeah. You’re right. It’s not like he’s gonna walk through our door or anything.”

“No.” Shiao studied Guy quietly and tried to bury the impulse to pull the Human into his arms. Ever since they had kissed he’d been having difficulty thinking of anything else.

He could not fully blame his recent link with Iason for these new feelings because in truth, he’d had such thoughts before, during the dark times. Sex with a human was forbidden, it was against Jupiter’s law. That law had been put in place for a reason, because Shiao had been the first one to cross it.

The original Onyx had been unable to control the emotions Jupiter had gifted them with. Many flew into uncontrollable rages, or became overly compassionate to the point where the Humans could take advantage of them. Shiao also had similar issues, but his true sin had been that when he had experienced a powerful lust for the first time, he had taken a young Human woman by force.

He had not meant to hurt her, he had only wished to sate this strange new feeling that overwhelmed him, but when she rejected him his unstable emotions caused him to become enraged, which heightened his lust and he raped her unmercifully. He used her to experiment with all the sexual techniques that he had been programed with, reasoning that these techniques had been put there for a purpose and that the purpose must be to use them. In the end, it had still not been enough. In the end, his lust was not fully sated and a woman died from his uncontrolled attacks.

Her death broke the fever inside of him and seemed to kill off the rest of his precious emotions as well. What he felt then was not something he could recognize, or define and because he was unstable, he had no way to react to it, or shut it out. It consumed him for weeks afterwards. He could not function in his daily duties, could not calculate or reason without feeling as though a weight was pressing down upon him. He would later title this emotion as remorse.

He could not cry for her, but he did mourn for her, in his own way. The bodies of the dead were usually placed into a machine to be recycled and used for food growth, it was an efficient system that had been put in place by Jupiter to eliminate waste. Once a body was fed into the machine their personal records, if there were any, were expunged from the system and it was as if they had never existed.

The logical thing to do would be to allow this woman to go the way of everyone else, and yet he could not. He could not allow her to be removed from all existence, nor would he allow himself to be expunged of her death. Instead, he had taken her into the hills and buried her, the way he had learned Humans once did for their dead. He buried her in an unmarked grave, but he knew where the grave was. He had intended to visit her often, as was the Human custom of atonement and grief, but things in his world changed.

Jupiter had learned of his shame and betrayal, as well as of those Onyx who had become uncontrollable, and ordered their termination. He and a few of his brothers had tried to flee Amoï to escape her wrath, but he was the only one who made it off planet. He'd had to live with that mark of shame ever since.

However, that was the original version of himself, the weaker, out of control version and he had promised himself he would never go back to being that inferior being. He would always be the android that had caused the extinction of his breed and that could not be changed. Without Jupiter's guidance, he'd had to learn to cope with his urges on his own; it had been a horrific and difficult process which ended up with him basically living alone, far away from civilization.

As time went by he began to hear of the creation of the Elites; this was not a title that had been given to his kind, but was for the new breed of creatures that Jupiter was creating. He watched from afar and learned the laws and controls She had set in place for her new children, including the use of pets.

He managed to re-integrate himself back into society on a selection of planets, far away from Jupiter's eye. Even far from Amoï, planets had heard of the creations of Jupiter and so many considered him an Elite, because he

looked similar, if not exactly the same as the new Onyx. But he had never been an Elite, he was only a defective by-product of Jupiter's experiments. His manner and perception was different than the other Elites, and always would be. He was a flawed being and he had accepted that, because he believed he had managed to purge the worst of his detriments from his system.

He had tried having a pet only once, after he learned that was the way the Elites dealt with their urges, but he had never been able to treat Terian with the cold efficiency that he witnessed in other Elites. Certainly, he derived some sexual satisfaction from watching his pet perform for him, or with another, but most often he was simply content to have Terian by his side, in his bed and curled up next to him. He liked hearing the boy laugh and loved to tease him. Terian had been the one light in his dark, shrouded life, the one person who fully accepted him and it meant that Shiao was no longer alone. His death had nearly pushed Shiao over the emotional edge again, which was why he had never bothered to get another pet. He could not allow himself to get too close to another again.

That had been his vow, and yet hadn't he already broken it by bringing Guy here? By offering a mongrel a place in his life, as a friend and companion? Hadn't Guy already become just as precious to him as Terian had been? All the more reason to be careful of his feelings and to avoid showing Guy the extent of them. Guy hated Iason Mink for making Riki a pet, Shiao had no doubt he would lose the mongrel if he even suggested any relationship beyond the one they had. It was too big of a risk.

"Shiao?"

The Onyx focused on Guy once again. "Hmmm?"

"Are you okay?" Your eyes looked kinda funny for a minute there."

"Did they?" Shiao blinked and recalibrated. "My apologies, I was considering a solution to your dilemma."

"Yeah? Come up with anything?"

“No.”

Guy sighed. “Yeah, me neither.”

Shiao opened his mouth, closed it, then tried again. “Perhaps you simply need something to take your mind off your troubles?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Shiao closed his hand over Guy’s medallion, which he was still holding. “I will keep this for you,” he offered. “Until you have time to truly digest what has happened and prepare a proper decision. It will be out of your sight, but still close if you require it.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Should we go shopping? Picking out fruits and vegetables always puts you in a better mood.”

Guy smirked and pushed away from the railing. “Well, we never had any of that stuff in Ceres.”

“You’re not in Ceres any more, Guy.”

Guy looked up at the Onyx again, nodded. “I know. I guess I just worry I’ll have to go back, eventually. I’m worried I’ll screw up and lose all of this.”

“You are welcome here for as long as you wish. I would never ask you to leave, Guy.”

“What if you get tired of me, or I piss you off or something?”

“I am not easily angered and why would I grow tired of our friendship? I have told you that you are my only true friend, why would I throw such a thing away?”

Guy smiled, shyly. “Yeah, I guess that would be pretty stupid.”

“And I am not stupid.”

“No. No you’re not.” They stepped back into the living area. “Okay, let’s go get some food. I think I’ll make Palenta for supper.”

“It sounds divine.”

Chapter 4

Summary for the Chapter:

Riki returns to where it all began to visit his old haunts

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! I am so thrilled you are enjoying the third part of the sequel, so much so I decided to update a little early so y'all can go out and party-harty for New Years in a good mood! See what getting comments does for me? Lol!

Riki rode his new air-cycle with abandon. When Iason had presented him with the keys to the air-cycle he had assumed there would still be limitations on his freedom. He'd expected to be stopped at the gates of Eos as he walked the bike out, those same gates that Daryll had opened to allow him a moment of freedom when he had been Iason's captive. But the doors opened for him without incident and then as he rode through the streets of Tanagura, he expected again to be stopped at the city entrance, but once more he was waved through. Iason really had allowed him the freedom to ride and that was a staggering thought.

At first, he had just wanted to take off somewhere, get away from Eos and his life there and feel the wind in his hair. The bike handled like a dream and he pushed it to it's limits on the stark and isolated highways outside of the major cities. With no deliberate destination Riki continued to ride, to run, perhaps to see how far he really could get before someone came after him.

A flicker of rebellion rose within him once he was outside the city limits, the idea of finding some hole to crawl into so he would never have to go back to being a pet of a Blondie, but he knew that Iason would find him again no matter where he went. Besides, he couldn't be without the Blondie anymore, he'd already accepted that- hadn't he?

He wasn't paying attention to where he was driving until he recognized the dilapidated city outline of Ceres. Pulling over to the side of the road, he removed his helmet and stared at the place where he had grown up. He knew now that he wasn't a slum mongrel, that he had not been born in Ceres, but it was still his home and the place where he had spent most of his life.

Did he miss it? No, he realized, he didn't miss it at all. The first time that Iason had freed him, all he could think about was getting back to the slums, because that was what he knew and what he considered safe. It didn't matter that he'd spent most of his life previously trying to run away from Ceres, when he'd been given his freedom he ran straight back to it.

He pulled a cigarette out of the pack from his pocket and lit it. What an idiot he had been. There had been nothing for him in Ceres except Guy and Bison, but even they had not been enough to keep him there, or he would never have taken that job with Katze. He would never have gone looking for a Blondie who'd only had to touch him once and he was addicted.

Seeing the city where he had grown up from a distance, when compared to the bigger, brighter structures of Tanagura was depressing. Why did so many of them have to live in squalor and in fear for their lives when the Elites and those who worked for or with them lived in the lap of luxury? It wasn't a fair system, but it was the only system he knew. On Avalon everyone seemed to have more than enough food to eat and the ability to work hard without needing a registration. They had real families, children were not abandoned and forced to get by on their own. After seeing the life on Avalon, even the idea of Ceres was repulsive.

He felt the swell of his anger and grief well up before he could think to control it and he stumbled off the bike just before it expunged itself into the hard, dry pavement of the roadway. Another powerful and painful urge hit him, driving him to his knees as he continued to empty the contents of his stomach as he thought of everything he'd had to do, every person he'd had to fuck and allow to fuck him just so he could get food for a day.

He thought of the beatings he had taken before he became smart enough, fast enough to outrun the bullies, and then big enough to beat them back.

The hot blazing days with no relief where he was forced to work from sun up to well past sundown in the factories until his fingers bled and his legs were numb. The freezing cold desert nights curled up on a cot that had far too many broken springs to ever be comfortable after a dinner of cold, tasteless soup and a piece of bread, and with only a raggedy blanket to keep warm. The bigger boys would huddle together and find another way to keep warm, and several times one of them would climb onto Riki's cot as well. Riki would have no choice but to let them do as they wanted, or risk freezing to death.

Then there had been the rats, the four-legged variety. Rats were every where in Ceres and there was no getting rid of them or keeping them out. They were part of the landscape and you just got used to it. If you were lucky you could trade a blow job for a small vile of Incine Liquid, which would keep the rats away from your room, but the smell could induce vomiting in Humans; at least until you got used to it. It was still better than waking up and finding an ear or toe had been gnawed off by a rat while you slept.

Slowly, Riki got to his feet, lit another cigarette, as he'd lost the first one when he started wrenching, and inhaled deeply. The tobacco seeped into his heaving lungs and he almost wept with relief. Life in Ceres had been intolerable, but he needed to get over the idea of what had been lost, had he not been taken from Avalon. He had to stop comparing his life here with what could have been, because there was no way back.

Making his way back to his bike, he slid a leg over it, realized his hands were still trembling slightly and so he took another hit of nicotine. The slums had made him what he was, and regardless of whether he was a pet or Prince, he was and always would be Riki the Dark. He had survived when so many others did not. He escaped when so many remained trapped in the day to day drudgery. Granted that escape had come in the form of an abduction and torture, but he was mostly over that. Mostly.

It wasn't like he was ungrateful for what the perks he did have living with Iason, either, because that wouldn't be realistic. He could still be resentful of what he'd had to do, what he'd had to become to get such advantages, and Iason didn't understand that. Iason only saw that he could give his pet whatever it desired and take what he wanted and it was a fair trade. Well,

Riki supposed it was a fair trade, when one considered the alternative, but at least in Ceres he still had a modicum of freedom and choice.

So, what was he doing here, really? Was he going to betray Iason, run away and hide again? Go back to using his body to get what he wanted from others, instead of just giving it to Iason? Did he even want to go back to this life? Or maybe he'd take a transport back to Avalon. He smirked, now that would really piss Iason off, but he doubted that his freedom to ride would get him that far.

Tossing his cigarette, he pulled his helmet back on and rode towards Ceres. Almost immediately a recognized stench permeated the air he drove through. Drunks littered the sidewalk, a few male prostitutes lingered around the corners. He received a few cautious stares that Riki knew was not an interest in him but more toward his bike, which would be coveted in a place like this.

He pulled up to **Duken's Bar** and shut down the engine, then sat back on the seat and soaked up the atmosphere. The hard core, grainy music of the bar assaulted his eardrums even through the helmet he wore and while he was still ten feet outside the door. The paint of the building was peeling and someone had shot out two of the letters in the sign so it said **Uke's Bar** instead. Nothing had changed since the last time he had been here. He would have found that comforting once upon a time, now it was just sad.

Tossing a leg behind him he stepped off the bike and pressed the security seal on his key fob, a sizzle of current hummed over the vehicle to prevent theft. Stepping over a guy who was slowly sliding into a drug addicted coma he pushed through the western style doors of the bar.

The air inside smelled of sweat, alcohol, some foreign spice and sex. Riki inhaled deeply as memories filled him, and tried to picture Iason in a dive like this. A smile slowly formed and he headed for the bar.

"Yeah, whaddya want?" the burly bartender spat, his face mirrored in the visor of Riki's helmet.

"A bottle of Juke."

A dark colored bottle was opened and slapped on the bar. "Money or trade?"

He slid his hand in the pocket of his jacket and came out with his pack of cigarettes.

"These work?"

The bartender snatched the pack, looked over the label and took out one cigarette to sniff the tobacco; his eyes rolled in appreciation. "This'll do." he began only to have Riki grab the pack back.

"The whole pack for one bottle?" he asked. "I don't think so, these are prime. I'll give you two."

"Five."

"Three, and you throw in a bowl of curls."

The bartender's eyes were glued to the pack of cigarettes that no one in Ceres could afford. "Gimmie six, I'll give you two bottles, the curls and a hand job."

"Not interested, but tell you what. I'll give you four for one bottle, the curls and the privacy booth in back. Final offer."

"Done." The bartender grinned, showing only three teeth and slammed his hand on the bar. He set a small bowl of fried Hada, which was a root vegetable that had been fried until crispy, then tossed a palm plate to Riki. "Booth is yours for an hour. You wanting company? Lotsa guys will do you for those prime sticks."

"I'm better off alone."

Riki grabbed his drink and food and headed for the dark interior of the booth. He slid inside into it, set everything but his helmet on the table, his helmet he set in the seat beside him. Placing the palm plate in the center of the table he pressed his hand to it and immediately a shaded veil came down over the booth. He could still see everything around him, but no one could see him. Being recognized could cause a hassle, he decided, and his

hiding in the booth had nothing to do with the shame he'd felt over his recent life choices.

He wondered how his gang was doing, he knew Guy was doing well, but what about the others? This was one of the bars that they frequented, so he might see them if he sat here long enough. Knowing they were still alive and okay would be enough for him, he decided. It would have to be.

Quietly he sipped his drink slowly, ate all of the Hada and let himself drift into his past memories at this bar. There had been several fights in here as well, with other gangs, or just idiots making a play for someone they couldn't really handle. Blood on the floor, a knife wound to the shoulder. More than once one or all of them had put someone in the med center, a few of them had ended up there a time or two as well.

A lot of bad times, a lot of dark times, but there were some good memories too, Riki realized. There had been some very good times with Guy, with his gang; memories that he had forgotten because his mind had been overwhelmed with only anger and resentment.

He remembered Guy spilling a bowl of food on himself then laughing so hard that they were all bent over with aching bellies. Or how flustered Norris was when the much older Maxi had started hitting on him, and how much they teased him about it later. How many times had Luke challenged Riki to a game of Gigooloy, hoping to win a quick bout of hot sex with their young leader, and Luke always lost.

Then there were the special, private moments with Guy, moments that Riki had forced himself to forget because while he was trapped by Iason such memories had been too painful to recall. He remembered the way Guy tried out different food combinations in an effort to improve Riki's palate, and sometimes the experiment would go horribly wrong. It didn't matter if it tasted awful, Riki would still eat it because Guy had made it, besides food was limited in Ceres so they wasted nothing.

The soft, protective touches that Guy always gave him, the kind that no one else ever dared to or risk Riki's wrath. Every time Guy petted him or stroked his hair the members of his gang would often stare in either horror,

resentment or envy, Only Guy had been allowed to touch him in such a gentle way; anyone else tried it and they'd receive the toe end of Riki's boot in their face.

He sipped his drink and let himself remember how it felt to be held in Guy's strong arms, what it was to completely trust someone and know they would be there for you, always. Guy had been the best of the best, loyal and giving, hard-assed when he needed to be and so unerringly sweet. Riki could feel the tears welling up and for once didn't try to push them back. No one could see him and it was time he finally said acknowledged what he and Guy had, and said goodbye to it for good.

When Guy had betrayed him so horrendously, he'd understood Guy's reasoning and had forgiven him for it, but then Guy showed up again and again, seemingly causing more trouble. He still understood the reasons, but he could no longer forgive them. Guy had loved him, and Riki had cared about Guy as well, though he couldn't define it as love. Riki had realized that love was something well and beyond what he had felt for Guy; and it had taken a Blondie to show him that. Still losing the trust he'd invested in Guy had been devastating and he couldn't continue to let it eat away at him.

Maybe that was why he ended up here in Ceres? To finally say goodbye to his old life, his old friends and truly wipe away his past. He lifted up his nearly empty bottle and offered a toast to his old pairing partner Guy, to his old gang Bison, to his old life. "So long Riki the Dark," he murmured. "May you rest in peace."

He finished off the bottle, then glanced up at the sound of a familiar voice as a tall hulking man walked into the bar with two others. Sid! Riki had to force himself to remain in his seat as he watched former Bison member lumber towards the booth opposite his and drop down into it with two younger men. His old friend did not look well, in fact, even though Riki knew Sid was only in his twenties, he looked like he was at least forty.

"Why we gotta come here?" the young blond boy whined. "I thought we were goin' back to your place, Sidi?"

"Gotta meet someone first."

The brunette on the other side of Sid and slid his hand into the large man's lap. "Is he gonna be our treat? You promised us one?"

"No, and don't be comin' on to him neither. He lost his partner awhile back and he's still feelin' it, so don't be crawling all over him. Clear?"

Riki wondered who Sid was talking about, and a moment later he spotted his answer. Maxi wandered up to the table, two beers in each hand and a permanent scowl on his face. Sid had said the person coming had lost their pairing partner, did that mean that Norris had broken up with him? Riki didn't think it possible, they had been as perfect a match as could be found in Ceres.

"Yo," Sid greeted accepting one of the beers as Maxi settled in the opposite side of their booth. "Where ya been?"

"Settling a score."

"Ah, shit, you didn't?" Sid sighed heavily. "I told you to wait and I'd come with you, man."

"I didn't need you. I'm not helpless and I got it done."

Sid studied Maxi quietly. "You hurt?"

"Few bruises, is all. They didn't get a chance to do much else."

"You get all three?"

"Yeah. All of 'em." Maxi took a long swallow of his beer, but Riki noticed the older man's lip trembled when he set the bottle down. "Norris woulda wanted it that way."

"Norris would have wanted you as far away from those murdering bastards as possible, man."

Maxi shrugged. "I owed them. I owed them for what they did to Norris."

Sid nodded sadly. "Yeah. Yeah, I know." He nudged his two playmates. "Scram for a while."

"But Sidi!"

"Go on, just give us a few minutes to talk, then I'll take ya home and give ya the treats I found, okay?"

Both young men grabbed their beers and wandered off.

Sid lifted his bottle in toast. "To Norris, at least he don't gotta be in this shit hole no more."

Maxi stared into his beer. "What happened to us, Sid? We were good once. Bison was the top gang in Ceres."

"Riki left, he was the brains and the negotiator, then Guy disappeared." Sid shrugged. "Luke got himself killed over a fucking game of Chase and Norris..." He broke off and lowered his eyes.

"We're going to die here too, aren't we?"

Sid shrugged. "Probably. Only the lucky ones get out, man, and we ain't lucky."

Riki finished off his drink, pulled his helmet on over his head then turned off the privacy screen and rose from the booth. He walked to the bar and pulled out the pack of cigarettes he'd used to barter with earlier. "You want the whole pack, right?"

"What I gotta do?" the bartender demanded, his eyes gleaming.

"Give this to the two guys at the table over there." Riki pulled out a sealed envelope and a data stick. "You tell 'em it's to repay a debt."

The bartender's eyes flickered sideways towards the booth, then back at Riki. "What's on it?"

"None of your business, and if you open it I'll know and I'll be back to collect." Riki flipped the visor of his helmet up. "You *don't* want me to come back here."

He watched with a small sense of satisfaction that the bartender recognized him. "You...you're..."

"You give them this and you don't tell them where you got it, or mention to anyone that I was here." He set a second unopened pack on the bar. "Deal?"

The bartender snatched the cigarettes before Riki could change his mind. "Ya, I'll do it." He picked up the items. "I'll do it right now. You can watch me. I ain't stupid enough to fuck with Ri..." He gulped as Riki reached across the bar and grabbed him by the shirt collar. He put his finger to his lips and the bartender nodded emphatically. "Right. Right I got it. I'm good. We're good. You and me,"

Sid glanced up as the Bartender appeared at their table and loudly cleared his throat. "Yeah?"

"This is yours. Payment of a debt." The bartender dropped the envelope and data stick on the table. "Don't ask me nothin- I don't know nothin'." He scrambled off as Maxi reached for the envelope and pulled it open.

"Holy..." He glanced around and quickly lowered his voice to a whisper. Holy fuck!" He tossed it to Sid so he could see prize inside.

"This..." Sid thumbed through the vouchers that were rarely seen in Ceres. This was Midas casino currency, it could be spent anywhere and this much was more than either of them had ever seen.

"Is it a raid?" Maxi demanded suddenly rising and glowering at everyone about them. Was the money a plant and they were about to be arrested?

"What's on the stick?" Sid demanded reaching for it and pulling out his well-used data pad. He plugged it in and saw that it was coded. "It's got a password."

"Give it here." Maxi grabbed the pad and pulled out a small hand held device, which he placed atop the pad, immediately letters and numbers started scrolling to search for the password and less than a minute later it beeped.

Sid watched Maxi pale and grabbed the pad. "What? What is it?" He pulled off the decoder and stared at what appeared to be back door security specs for a casino in Midas. "Fuck me, this is the jackpot, man! With this we could..." When he looked up he saw that Maxi was not paying attention, instead he was standing and scanning the room with his eyes. "What is it man? You think it's a trap?"

"The password," Maxi whispered and then spotted a form moving towards the door. "The password was Bison."

Sid stared at him blankly for a moment, then at the data pad and envelope money. There had been a biker in here earlier, he'd seen the guy rise out of the privacy booth and walk over to talk to the bartender. There had been something familiar about the guy. He'd had a helmet on hiding his face, a black and red leather jacket black jeans. Black...leather.

"Fuck me!" Sid grabbed up the envelope, shoved the data pad in his jacket and bolted across the bar, shoving through the door and almost smack into Maxi just in time to see the mysterious rider drive off. "Shit! Shit!" He ran to his air-cycle. "Get on!" Maxi complied and the moment he had a leg over the bike they darted off down the road.

"Who is it?" Maxi shouted over the roar of their refurbished machine. "Do you think it's a rival gang?"

"Why would a rival gang give us money and a way to break into the biggest casino in Midas?"

"A trap maybe? Remember what that shit Kirie did to us before?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Then why...?"

"I gotta know!" Sid screamed back. "I gotta know if I'm right."

"Who do you think it is?"

"Riki!"

Maxi jolted so hard he almost fell off the bike, but he quickly regained his balance. "Why the hell would Riki be back here? He belongs to that fucking Blondie doesn't he?"

"I dunno. Maybe he escaped, maybe he's free. I dunno but we gotta catch him, man. It's Riki. It's Fucking A Riki!"

They roared through the streets at break neck speed, then suddenly lost sight of the rider in the front. Sid slowed the bike, looking down the alley ways for where Riki could have gone. Not seeing him they continued on. They rode around the city for an hour and could not find their former leader.

"If it was Riki, he's gone, man," Maxi stated quietly as they pulled to a stop.

"Why would he run? Why wouldn't he stop and talk to us?"

Maxi shrugged and pulled the envelope full of money out of his pocket. "Maybe this was all he wanted to say."

Sid glanced back at his friend, considered what they could do with that much money. And how much they might get from the Casino. It might even be enough to get them out of the slums for good. "He's still playing leader."

"He's still Riki." Maxi squeezed Sid's massive shoulder. "He didn't forget us, man." Maxi wiped away a tear that escaped his left eye. "Now we have to do the right thing."

"The right thing?"

"We have to escape like he did. He believes we can, or he wouldn't have left us this money."

Sid considered Maxi's words, then slowly nodded and turned his bike around. "He coulda stayed and let us see him, though. Let us thank him, or tell us how he's doing."

"Riki isn't one for that kinda thing, never has been."

Sid nodded again. "True. So, we'll do right by him then. We'll get the fuck out of here and do what he done."

"Wait."

Sid glanced back at Maxi.

"Where are we going?"

"Home."

"Why?"

Sid blinked. "Huh?"

"What the hell have we got to go back too?" Maxi reminded. "There's enough in here for a few days of meals and a nice room. If we can get into that casino, we might even have enough for two tickets off planet. Let's just go, now, before someone finds out we have it. Let's just disappear, like Riki and Guy did, man. It's the best way."

Sid nodded and turned the bike back towards the highway. "Yeah. Fuck it. Let's just go." He squeezed the throttle and the bike zipped off into the night.

Riki quietly moved his air-cycle out of the shadows and watched his friends ride away. He'd been carrying his winnings from the casino around in that jacket since that trip with Iason months ago; and he had intentionally changed into his comfortable clothes and that jacket before he left, knowing the money was in there. Preparing the casino specs had been more of a hobby, to see if he still had the touch to pull off a job and it had been kind of thrilling to carry it around with him without anyone knowing. Subconsciously he had probably intended to use both to run at some point,

but he belonged to Iason, belonged with him and nothing could change that now.

Remembering how concerned the Blondie had been when Riki accepted the air-cycle as his gift played in Riki's mind often enough that he knew if he did run, he wouldn't do it today. He wouldn't hurt Iason that way. Just like he wouldn't leave Iason when the android couldn't walk, Riki used recent events as a reason to stay a little longer.

It wasn't until he actually found himself close to Ceres that he realized he wasn't going to use the money, that he wasn't ever going to run again. He didn't want to come back to the slums, and he wasn't ready to go to Avalon, or off planet either. He just wanted to be with Iason, and he had to finally face the fact, the true fact, that he loved Iason and had forgiven the Blondie for everything that had been done to him.

He didn't need the money, and maybe giving it to what was left of his gang would help erase some of the debt he owed them. They had been his family after all, they had believed in him, fought with him. They had loved him, in their own way and Riki would forever be grateful for that. Yeah, it was time to accept things the way they truly were. Time for Riki the Dark to finally grow up.

"Good luck, guys," he whispered, then slapped his visor down and rode off in the other direction.

Chapter 5

Summary for the Chapter:

Riki returns to Eos and finds someone waiting for him

Riki arrived back in Tanagura just as the sun was coming up. Iason had arranged for a parking space for his new bike outside of the main gates of Eos, at least according to the paperwork he found with the bike. He shrugged off the suspicious looks that the attendants gave him, but could still hear them whispering about why a pet would riding such a vehicle. Pets didn't have permission to drive and had to rely on Furniture, with their master's permission, if they wanted to go somewhere outside of Eos.

Luckily, there were no pets around because Riki was not in the mood for them. Most would probably still be sleeping after the evening's pet parties, and the Elites were probably all still in bed, as well, so at least he didn't have to worry about getting into it with any of them.

He walked around to the gates of Eos and stared up at the intricately carved doors. A feeling of hesitation crawled through him as he moved closer. Once more he recalled his brief escape just a couple of years ago, and the severe beating he'd taken from security for the attempt. The memory of the additional punishment from Iason at the med center with that damn cock ring made him grimace. He glanced towards the cameras and wondered who sat inside the control room now, holding the power of letting people out or keeping them inside?

Part of him screamed to turn around, to run back to Ceres or Midas or anywhere that was not here, but he couldn't. He didn't know any more if his choices were really his own or were part of his conditioning, but he couldn't keep second guessing himself like this. The money he'd won at the casino had been given to Sid and Maxi and he'd officially left Ceres and all it entailed behind him. He was finally making his own choices, instead of having them made for him and one of those decisions was based on the reality that he and Iason were going to be together for the long run.

Twirling the ring on his finger, he considered the power of the kind of promise it represented. In Ceres you just had to announce that you had a pairing partner and that was considered a solid relationship. Although people fell out all the time, so it wasn't a guarantee for a lifetime commitment, but even in Ceres there were stories about pairing for life and ceremonies and the like, sometimes off worlders wore similar jewelry to mark their commitment. Riki had never personally seen one, but he understood what it meant when Iason had offered the rings.

He'd accepted the ring, accepted that he would never truly be free of Iason, yet he was still having doubts. Why? Why was he still not sure? Why was he still afraid? It still didn't make sense to him, why Iason wanted him. After learning about this weird power of his he was sure that had to be the reason, but as Iason pointed out he was not a biological being so it wouldn't affect him.

The sex was phenomenal, there was no disputing that, but if that had been all it was Iason would have continued to use and treat him as a pet. Granted he was still treated as a pet outside of the condo, but inside...inside if he were just a pet he wouldn't be sleeping in Iason's room and eating at the dinner table. His pride refused to allow him to admit that to Iason, or to anyone, but in his heart he knew the difference. Katze had once remarked that Iason had sacrificed a lot to keep Riki as a pet, and while he hadn't acknowledged it at the time, he knew then too. He knew that Iason was continuously putting himself in a precarious position and yet he could not concede the point.

"Are you going in or you just going to stand here?"

Riki spun around and rolled his eyes at Katze who stood barely an inch from him. How did he do that? Riki's instincts were keen, he could always tell when someone was too close to him, yet he never, ever saw or heard Katze coming. Maybe he was out of practice. Maybe he was getting lazy and weak living in the lap of luxury.

"Don't you sleep?" he snarled.

“Occasionally.” Katze returned, mildly. He had seen Riki leave last night and decided to wait and see when and if he would return. Iason had given him strict instructions not to follow the mongrel, which was foolish in Katze’s mind, but it was an order and so he accepted it. Still, he had asked to be notified if Riki returned, just in case. “You’ve been gone a while.”

“Iason tell you to keep tabs on me?”

“Believe it or not I do have things to do other than babysit a wayward pet.”

“So then why are you here?”

“I was curious.”

“About what?”

“Whether or not you’d actually come back.” Katze shrugged. “I see you have, and now I can go about my regular business.”

“Hey!” Riki called as the red-head turned away. He waited until Katze turned back. “Do you...do you want to get breakfast...or something?”

Katze studied Riki and could see the spark of rebellion warring with his insecurity. He had come back, but he wasn’t ready to go inside yet. “Sure, I know a place, let’s go.”

Riki fell in step beside him and tried not to show his relief.

“So, how’s it handle?”

“What?”

“The bike?”

Riki grinned. “Like a dream.”

Katze’s eyebrow rose as he tried to think if he had ever seen Riki smile before. Yes, sure he had, hadn’t he? When they had been playing pool! That

was the only other time, he realized. Shame, the smile transformed Riki's entire face in what could almost be considered innocence.

"Maybe you'll let me try it out sometime."

"Maybe. For three packs of your special brand."

"Three?" Katze smirked as they turned down one of the laneways of Tanagura. His brand of cigarettes came from off world and weren't cheap or easy to procure. He didn't even try to resell them, just kept them for himself. "That's pushing it. One pack and I get the ride for three hours."

"For three packs, I'll let you use it a whole day."

Katze's eyes narrowed. "Iason doesn't like you smoking that much, remember?"

"What Iason doesn't know won't hurt me, besides your smokes are stronger so I won't need to have as many."

Katze wasn't sure about Riki's reasoning, but decided to relent as they entered a small eatery that was always open. "Two packs for a full day, but if I catch hell from Iason you may find yourself smoking a Black Moon."

Riki remembered all too well the cigarettes that Katze had given him outside of Dana Bahn before he'd gone back for Iason. He couldn't completely remember the details of what happened after they lit them, but it was probably better that way.

He dropped into the booth in the corner and tapped the middle of the table to bring up the screen menu. "I'm starving."

Katze nodded as they programmed their selections then he swiped his hand across the table to close the menu. "So, what does it feel like to be a Prince?"

"No different than it does to be a pet," Riki retorted as the droid appeared with their food and two coffees. "To be honest, I still don't really believe it."

“Well, it’s a lot to take in.”

“Yeah.” Riki picked up his fork and started to eat.

“Why didn’t you stay?”

Riki glanced at Katze, chewed his mouthful of food and swallowed.
“Jupiter would have destroyed the planet.”

“Is that the only reason for your choice?”

“What choice?” Was he supposed to let everyone die because of him?

“They might still have been able to negotiate something.”

Riki shook his head. “No, they wouldn’t.” Iason would never have left him behind, and Jupiter wouldn’t have let Iason stay. He shrugged and shoved some more food into his mouth.

Katze sat back and sipped his coffee. “If you could go back, would you?”

“I can’t so there’s no point talking about it.”

“But if you could. Would you?”

Riki set his fork down and met Katze’s penetrating gaze. “Is this a test? Did Iason ask you to ask me this?” Did the Blondie doubt his decision? Did he still think Riki would run?

“I deal in trade, remember? Despite our situation at the time, I could see that Avalon has a lot to offer Amoï. If we could establish trade with them, it might be worth it to have you along.”

Riki recalled his offer to Jupiter at the time as well and his suspicions grew against Katze’s questioning. “You work for Jupiter now?”

“I work for Iason. I know my job and I know how to press an advantage. Avalon has what Amoï needs. You have what I need, a solid connection to

Avalon. There's nothing more to it than that. I'm simply trying to do my job."

Riki stared down at his food, then took another bite and chewed thoughtfully. He still wasn't sure if this wasn't just some test, or if he could trust Katze not to exploit him; after all that was what Katze did. He knew nothing about trade agreements with other planets, he was a slum mongrel, regardless of genetics it was where he was raised.

Aside from his relationship with the Queen, he couldn't see how he could be worth anything to Katze, especially since the relationship with the woman who claimed to be his mother was strained at best. Did he want to go back to Avalon? He still had questions, still had concerns, but he had decided to bury that when Iason told him they couldn't stay. Iason had promised that they might be able to go back at some point so Riki could try and get some resolution on his past, but he didn't even know if he wanted to.

He had taken Yielia with them because he owed the Queen for saving him and Iason, and so he agreed to her demand. The Queen had said Yielia could answer any questions he had about who he was and where he came from, but he hadn't had the courage to ask any yet. There were so many, but where did he start? Asking questions would make him appear weak, it always did in Ceres. You pretended not to care until someone either offered the information freely to impress you, or to pay back a favor. He couldn't imagine any answers he received would make him want to return to Avalon. It was open and natural, the air smelled fresh and the waters looked clean and without any filtration needs, but what would he actually do in all that nature?

Unable to give Katze a straight answer until he decided one for himself, Riki changed the subject. "Do you remember being anything other than Furniture?"

"No," Katze lied easily.

"Not even your decision of why you became one?" Although since most Furniture were selected at the age of six, he wondered if a child that young

even consider the consequences? He thought about his own life, when he had been that age, and realized that yes he could.

“I guess I thought it was a good idea at the time.”

“To be castrated and forced to serve Elites for the rest of your life?” Riki could still recall the pain and horror he felt when he had awakened in that underground basement in the abandoned Dana Bahn and realized what Guy had done to him.

“There are worst things.”

“Like what?”

“Like being a pet.”

Riki’s head shot up and he glared at Katze, but then saw the amusement in the red-head’s eyes and realized he was being teased. “How old are you?”

“Old enough to know better than to answer that question.” Katze stabbed a piece of fried meat and popped it in his mouth. “Why?”

“I’m older than I thought I was. The King, or whatever the fuck he was said I was closer to twenty-eight in Human years.”

“No way!” Katze blinked in surprised. Riki was only two years younger than him? That seemed wrong somehow. “You can’t be.”

Riki shrugged. Apparently the people of Avalon, and I guess that includes me now, have a pretty long life span. The people at Guardian got my age wrong and thought I was a lot younger.”

“Well, yeah, I guess they did.” Katze paused. “How does Iason feel about that?”

“I haven’t told him.”

“Do you think it would make a difference?”

Riki shrugged, uncomfortable. He was concerned about it. Having a pet that was twenty-one was bad enough, but one that was almost thirty? It seemed inconceivable.

“You should tell him,” Katze suggested. “Your relationship has survived much worse than a sudden change in age.”

“I know that sounds sensible but...” He didn’t know if Iason would accept any more surprise changes. Wasn’t it bad enough that he was supposedly a Prince from another world, with weird powers he couldn’t understand or control, and that once again Guy was allowed to escape? It seemed adding his difference in age might just be the last straw for Iason.

“Does it matter to you?” Katze asked, studying Riki thoughtfully.

“Not really, I mean, I feel as old as I feel, but it’s still weird to know I’m older, y’know? I mean, in Ceres it was rare for anyone to survive past forty, and here I am almost that already.”

“Hardly,” Katze chuckled and lit a cigarette, then handed one to Riki as well. “And you’re not in Ceres anymore, so you shouldn’t go by that standard.” Katze lit both their cigarettes then inhaled deeply. In truth, Riki had never been just a slum mongrel. Even before he knew the truth, Katze saw that, as had Iason. “What’s really bothering you?”

Riki leaned back in the booth and puffed on his cigarette. “I don’t know.” He couldn’t believe he was actually sitting here talking about this, especially to Katze. “I’ve always known who I was, or thought I did. Even after Iason took me and trained me as a pet, I’ve still always been me.”

Katze dropped the ash off his cigarette in the provided receptacle and nodded. “True.”

“But now, I find out I wasn’t that person at all and that I’m someone else entirely.” Riki paused. “Are you gonna tell Iason any of this?”

“Only if he asks me. Believe it or not, kid, I have only ever given Iason information about you that he asked for.”

Riki nodded, and supposed that was reasonable.

“So now you don’t feel like yourself, is that what you’re saying?”

Riki shrugged again. “Not really. I still feel like me but I know I’m not me.” He groaned and dropped his head in his hands. “I don’t fucking know what I’m saying.”

Katze studied Riki for a few minutes, before commenting. He’d been willing to play many roles over the years, but a counselor wasn’t one he was qualified for. “Well, I’ve always thought that if you don’t like who you are, change it.”

“It’s not that easy.”

It’s easier than you think, kid. “Who life was easy? So you’re not a slum mongrel, so what? So you’re a Prince or whatever of some other place, who cares? You are who you have always been, Riki, because you are the one who made the choices that have gotten you to this place, at this time, on this day. You’ve never been the type to listen to people before, never allowed yourself to be trapped in a box based on what others think you should be, so why would you now?”

Riki considered Katze’s words. He’d always rebelled against anyone who tried to control him or force him to be less than he was. By fighting the system in Ceres, he learned how it worked and used it to his advantage to get things he wanted. He’d fought Iason, through torture and brainwashing and a hell of a lot of shit, but he still managed to maintain who he was inside and he never let Iason change that.

Why should he let people he had never heard of before tell him who he was or should be based on genetics? Being a slum mongrel wasn’t anything to be proud of, but he was proud, he was proud because he had survived and hadn’t allowed the slums to swallow him as it had so many others. He hadn’t become an addict or a whore. He hadn’t used violence unless it was necessary and he never deliberately hurt someone if he could avoid it.

Against all odds, he had maintained his own identity, decided on his own moral code and grew into a leader capable of sustaining not only his life but those of his gang. He always paid what he owed and if there was something he wanted badly enough he managed to find a way of getting it. He took nothing for granted and was loyal to those who had proven their loyalty to him.

Being a Prince of Avalon may have given him a better place to grow up and an easier life, but would it have really made him a better person? Better than the person he was now? Instead of doing without he would have had everything, and probably would have become ungrateful and materialistic? Instead of learning the hard way that not everyone could be trusted, everyone would have pretended to be loyal and he would have been taken advantage of. And what kind of person would he be if just being a Prince demanded respect and he'd never had to work to earn it?

"Hey?" Katze waved a hand in front of Riki's face. "You okay?"

Riki blinked and pulled himself out of his thoughts. "Yeah. Yeah I'm fine."

"Good." Katze doused his cigarette and rose. "Because I don't get paid enough for pet counseling." He caught the piece of bread that Riki threw at him. "I'll take care of the bill then I have to get back to work. You want me to knock you out and bring you through the gates first?"

"Try it." Riki finished off his cigarette and rose. "I'll pay, I asked you."

"Suit yourself." Katze waved and headed out as Riki moved to the front.

He pulled out Iason's credit stick, felt the usual resentment about using it because it made him feel like he owed Iason even more. "Fuck it," he muttered as he slid the stick into the payment slot, waited for it to confirm, then pulled it out again. Glancing at his watch he saw that he still had several hours before Iason would be out of seclusion.

"Katze!" he called hurrying out of the eatery and catching up to the black-market dealer. "Hold up."

“What do you want now? A cuddle?”

“I’ll come with you. Maybe I can help out like I did before?”

“Do you have permission from Iason?”

“He’s in seclusion.”

“Then I can’t help you.”

“Look!” Riki caught his arm. “He let me leave the city on my own, isn’t that enough? I won’t stay long, but I don’t want to go back to the condo yet. There’s nothing to do there.”

“What about the girl you brought back?”

“Come on, I barely know her...” Riki shoved his hands in his pockets.
“And I...kinda promised Iason not to be alone with her to much.”

Katze chuckled. “Fine, come on then.”

Riki fell in step beside him again.

Chapter 6

Summary for the Chapter:

Cal is having a rough time

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter was harder to write than I thought it would be, and I hope that I haven't made it too Angsty or Cal seem too desperate but the reality of what he faced would break even the strongest of hearts. I hope you understand and enjoy it in the spirit that it is written.

Cal perused the study guide that he had spent most of the morning preparing, then added a few more tasks and another disc of books for Riki to read. They'd lost over a week of lessons so he had to convince Riki to work hard to make it up. He took his job as the pet's tutor very seriously and he could not allow anything to distract him from his duties.

Raoul had given him a spare room to use, but he knew he could not stay there forever. Eventually he would have to return to Iason's condo and continue Riki's education. The bruises around his wrists and neck had almost faded so he probably had one more day at best before he would have to leave.

Raoul had assured him that both Iason and Riki had returned from Avalon unharmed and he was relieved. He hadn't asked about Bean and Raoul did not bring up Iason's Furniture either, so it was best to leave it at that. If the boy was still at Iason's condo, then he would just have to be professional and deal with it. After all, he was Furniture before he was a tutor; he was trained to behave in an appropriate manner regardless of the situation.

When a hand dropped on his shoulder he reared up from the chair and slammed against the wall in fear, before he'd even registered the movement.

“I...I just brought you a sandwich,” Peter offered kindly, startled by the older boy’s reaction. “I thought you’d be hungry. I apologize for startling you.”

Cal tried to calm his breathing and swallowed the bile that had risen in his throat as he carefully pushed off the wall and straightened his tunic. “Yes. Thank you, Peter.”

Peter set the tray of food and a glass of milk on the desk where Cal had been working. “Are you okay? Should I call the doctor?”

“No. No, I’m fine, I was just very involved in my lesson plan, that’s all.”

Peter nodded and moved to the door. “If you require anything else, just let me know.”

“I will. Yes, I will. Thank you, Peter.”

Peter stepped out, closed the door and did not see Cal slowly slide down the wall and start to shake.

Wrapping his arms around himself Cal started to rock and then cursed his weakness. He couldn’t stop thinking about how brutal those three men had been to him. Even now, after many showers and scrubbing his skin rough enough to leave marks he could still feel their hands upon him. Having anyone else touch him now sent him into a panic! How could he possibly return to Master Iason and Riki in this state? If he couldn’t maintain a calm demeanor, then he was unfit to be in their presence. If he didn’t return to Master Iason’s then what would become of him? Perhaps he could go back and work for Katze? No, in his current state he would only be a burden on Katze as well. What should he do? What should he do?

After a moment, he regained his composure and stood up. Straightening his clothes, he moved to the desk and stared at the tray. It looked identical to the meal that Bean had prepared him and it made his stomach churn. Gritting his teeth, he deliberately picked up the sandwich and took a bite, ignoring the fact that it seemed to turn to dust in his mouth. With a trembling hand, he reached for the milk, then suddenly dropped the

sandwich and ran for the washroom, where he threw up the small piece he had managed to consume.

When he was left with nothing in his stomach and the dry heaves finally eased, he rose and stumbled to the sink. His reflection portrayed someone other than himself, gray skin and sunken, blood shot eyes. A look of despair stared back at him, and it was so painful to see that he almost started to wretch again.

“This won’t do,” he croaked and rinsed his mouth before splashing water on his face. He could never return to Master Iason’s now, nor could he work for Katze or anyone else. He was now defective Furniture and needed to do the honorable thing; end it before he became a burden or an embarrassment to anyone.

He stepped back into the bedroom, steadier now that he had made his decision, and moved to the window. Releasing the security latch, he pushed the window open as wide as he could, then slid one leg over it.

“It’s better this way,” he decided as he thought of how much easier things would be for his Masters if he took care of his shame himself. “Yes. This is the appropriate thing to do.” He slid his other leg over the window ledge and stared down at the ground far, far below. He barely noticed the air traffic that zoomed past his line of vision as he gripped the sill and prepared to let go.

He suddenly thought of how his death might reflect on Raoul, who had been very kind to him. A Furniture throwing themselves out of a window might cause a blemish on the Blondie’s reputation. That wouldn’t do. He’d have to find another way. Perhaps if he left the apartment he could find some way...No. He couldn’t just walk into a disintegration center, there would be questions and when they ran his registration they would find he who he belonged to and would contact Iason.

And yet he couldn’t continue like this, so frightened and unmanageable all the time. If he couldn’t properly perform his duties, he was useless. But how could he end his life without causing a bother for those he respected?

He looked down again. Maybe he was over thinking this? Perhaps the death of a Furniture would not be as important as he was considering himself to be? It would be called an accident and accidents happen all the time. Perhaps it wouldn't become a bother to Master Raoul if he did jump? Yes, that was probably it. He was over thinking. He took a deep breath and prepared to release the windowsill, only to be grabbed from behind and pulled back inside.

The panic hit almost instantly and he started to fight, but Peter was a trained Furniture and had Cal subdued and immobile in seconds, despite Cal's larger size.

"Stop this!" the younger Furniture ordered. "I will not harm you, Cal. Calm yourself!"

Peter's voice registered and Cal willed his body to grow still.

He blinked as if suddenly realizing what was happening, then he started to shake again at the thought that he had almost died. "I...I apologize."

"Are you calm?" Peter demanded.

"I am."

Slowly, reluctantly Peter released him, then hurried over to close and lock the window. He turned back at Cal, who remained prone on the floor.

"What were you thinking?" Peter accused, flustered. "You cannot do something like this!"

"I...I'm not sure."

Peter, who rarely lost his temper barked. "I understand you have been injured but you must get past it, Cal. You cannot disgrace your master or mine in this manner!"

Slowly Cal sat up. "I am a disgrace. That is why I wished to end my life."

“That is not your decision! You belong to Master Iason, only he can decide if you are to be terminated!”

Cal nodded slowly. “I am not...myself. I apologize.”

“Will you not allow me to call a doctor? Perhaps he...”

“My physical injuries are nearly healed, so there is no need.” Cal rose from the floor, straightened his shirt and brushed off his slacks.

“Then you must allow them to do a mental examination.”

“No!” Cal was surprised by his vehemence and quickly lowered his voice to a calmer level. “I can deal with this.”

“You can’t! If you could you wouldn’t have just tried to end your life!” Peter stepped forward and lifted his hand toward Cal, watched the older boy step back. “You cannot even allow me to touch you. How is that dealing with it?”

“It has only been a couple of days. I will be fine. I can do this on my own!”

“If you believed that you would not have just had your legs out a window on the eighty-seventh floor.” Peter paused as the door opened and Shira, Raoul’s female pet entered.

“I heard yelling. Is everything okay?”

“Yes, it is.” Peter’s demeanor immediately calmed and his voice became milder. “I have prepared a bath for you with the scent you like. Go and get in and I will be there shortly.”

The girl nodded and stepped out.

“If you have not the sense to think about your own wellbeing,” Peter said to Cal. “Then will you please consider my position? If something were to happen to you while you were under my care, I would be severely punished.”

Cal nodded. "I understand and again I apologize. I will not do that again."

"You will not try to injure yourself at all during your stay? I have your word?"

"You do. I am sorry."

Peter nodded and straightened his apparel to soothe himself. "Honestly, you have robbed me of at least ten years of my young life."

"I'm sorry."

Peter's expression softened. "Are you sure there is no one I can call for you? Perhaps if you talked about it?"

"No. There is no one. I promise to behave."

"Okay. Good." Peter pointed to the tray on the desk. "Eat your food then."

Cal nodded and watched Peter leave. He released a breath and put his hand to his heart. What had he been thinking? Everything that Peter had said was true, how could he be so irresponsible? He returned to the desk, stared at the food and then turned away. Perhaps if he slept he would feel better, that was often what he prescribed for Riki. Crawling onto the bed he curled up on his side, tried to calm his breathing and then let his tears of frustration and fear fall silently onto the pillow.

"That's enough," Raoul stated and waved his hand as Shira masturbated in front of him. He was getting none of the pleasure he usually did while playing with his pet, and he couldn't understand why. Perhaps his mind was simply too full of other things, Joining with Jupiter usually calmed him, centered him, but this time it there seemed to be a level of discomfort. He felt as if he was not fully submerged as was required for the joining.

Jupiter rarely let even her own creations get so close that they knew all the AI's plans and secrets, normally that did not alarm him, but this joining felt different. It was as if Jupiter was deliberately leaving doubts in his head by

making him think She was hiding something important. Since it was not his place to question his creator, he decided he needed a diversion to clear his mind of it, which was why when he returned home he immediately sent for his pet.

Shira crawled over to her Master, her chest heaving from being so close to an organism and then being denied. “Did I not please you, Master?” she asked, breathlessly. “Is there not anything else I can...?”

Raoul slid a gloved hand through her ash blond hair. “You did well, I am simply distracted.”

Smiling she walked her fingers across his knee and he nodded. Giggling she quickly climbed into his lap and sighed as his hands caressed her. “How can I help end your distraction Master?”

Raoul considered the question as he caressed the soft, supple skin beneath his fingers. In a year, he would pay a mating fee to Po Laren for use of his male pet and he would get some pups from her, but for now she was too young.

Peter stepped into the room. “Excuse me, Sir. I just received a message from the Med-Centre.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“You asked to be kept apprised of Rodin’s pet Anjell. He has been admitted to the center with severe lacerations and internal bleeding.”

“That idiot.” Raoul scooted Shira off his lap and rose. “Have Rodin picked up and advise the Med Centre not to release the pet to him. How many days is Anjell expected to be there?”

“They have repaired the bleeding and he is no longer critical, so perhaps three, assuming there are no further complications from his surgery.”

“Tell them to keep the pet for an additional twenty-four hours.”

Peter nodded and stepped back out.

“Why do you care of another’s pet?” Shira pouted from her position on the floor.

“Jealousy does not suit you,” Raoul said and patted her head. “Go have a bath, I will come and put you to bed shortly.”

“And stay until I fall asleep?” she asked hopefully bounding up.

He pulled a candy from his pocket and handed it to her. “Perhaps, if you are good.”

She giggled again and hurried off.

Raoul watched her, amused, then moved to the mini bar and poured himself a drink. He swirled the liquid in the glass then lifted it to his lips, paused. “How much longer will you hide here?”

Cal stepped forward into the light. “I apologize for the burden, sir. I can leave now, if you so desire it.”

“Are you ready to go back to Iason’s then?”

“Ready or not, I cannot inconvenience you any longer.”

“Come here.” Cal complied and Raoul removed his glove to touch Cal’s forehead. “You are still feverish.”

“Only a little and it will pass.”

“Hmmm.” Raoul pulled his glove back on.

“I appreciate your kindness, sir. I am sure I’ll be fine by tomorrow.”

“I understand you have not been eating.”

Cal felt a spark of panic. “I...I have not been very...”

Raoul stepped closer. “Peter is not Bean, Cal. He would never dare do such things.” Once Raoul had seen to Cal’s injuries he had demanded an

explanation of what happened. Cal advised that he remembered nothing after eating the food that Bean had given him, so he had suspected that he had been drugged.

“I know that, I...Bean was angry with me, threatened by me. I should not have...I cannot...” Cal could feel his emotions taking over and tried to rein them in. He straightened his shoulders, even though they trembled at what he was about to suggest. “Perhaps I should be admitted for retraining?”

“You have done nothing to warrant such a request,” Raoul dismissed. “Bean’s actions were his own and are no reflection on you or your abilities.”

That may be true, but regardless of who was to blame, Cal no longer felt he could maintain the duty of Furniture. “My abilities have been...compromised, Sir.”

“You can still read and speak can you not?”

Cal blinked, confused. “Of course.”

“Then I cannot see how your abilities have changed. You are the pet’s tutor now, not Furniture, or have you forgotten your re-designation?”

“No, but...”

Raoul dropped a hand on Cal’s shoulder, felt the flinch and pulled away again, concerned by the reaction. “Iason has not yet managed to amend the age law that Orphe set in place. To submit you for retraining would mean reassigning you as Furniture, and you are now too old by law for such a designation. Therefore, you would have to be terminated or sold off as the others were.”

He had never thought much about it the law’s reinstatement at first, Furniture was easily replaceable, except for Peter of course, who did so much more for him than normal Furniture. He had adjusted Peter’s records to show that he was only eleven, when he actually was fourteen, but Peter was small for his age and so no one was any the wiser.

When Cal still had not responded, Raoul scowled. “Is this another attempt to end your life?”

Cal lowered his eyes. Of course, Peter would have told Raoul about the earlier incident. “It is only logical to eliminate damaged goods or to rid one's self of waste.”

“Is that what you are?”

“I can no longer perform my duties.”

“Why?”

“I...I am having difficulty containing my emotions, which is the source of ruin for any Furniture. Even as a tutor, I must be able to remain calm and authoritative to set a good example for my student.”

“Sit.” Raoul indicated one of the high back chairs as he settled on the sofa and watched Cal comply obediently. “Explain to me what emotions you are having difficulty suppressing.”

Cal stared at the Blondie for a long moment, and then looked away. “Must I?”

“Yes.” Raoul crossed one long leg over the other. “I have a keen interest in the reactions and emotions of Humans. Perhaps you may also find it therapeutic.” When Cal continued to hesitate, he added. “I have not mentioned your situation to Iason, I have kept my word on that and I will do so with this also. You may speak to me in confidence.”

Cal pressed his legs firmly together to prevent them from shaking and linked his fingers together over his knees. “I am unsure what to say.”

“Tell me how you feel.”

“At this moment?”

“Yes, and at the moments when you feel you are unable to control your emotions.”

“At this moment, I feel...I feel...” Ashamed. Disgusted. Angry. Trapped.
“Uncomfortable.”

“Anything else?”

Cal was silent.

Raoul could not see any physical evidence, in the young man's demeanor or expression, of discomfort or of the internal struggle Cal apparently faced, but most Furniture excelled at maintaining an emotionless façade.

"You mentioned you were unable to complete your duties, are you feeling obsolete?" Silence. "Answer me."

Cal could not refuse a direct order and so he nodded slowly. He was duty bound to respond honestly to a direct order from an Elite, unless it somehow compromised his Master or his household.

“Why did you feel the need to end your life?”

Cal’s back stiffened further. “Because...I am damaged.”

“How are you damaged?”

“I can no longer perform my duties.”

“Why do you believe that to be true?”

“I am easily distracted.”

“What is it that distracts you?”

Cal’s knuckles turned white by the pressure he squeezed into them. “I...I find it difficult to forget.”

“How did it make you feel, having those men do such things to you?”

No! He couldn’t talk about this! He didn’t want to remember! Cal pushed down the urge to shove away from brutal hands grabbing, scraping, pinching, hurting...He shifted in his seat as a ghostly painful throbbing

began in his lower regions in memory of what had been shoved inside of him, over and over and over again. Shoved hard and fast inside his bottom, his mouth, like hot, stone posts raping him, ravaging him, punishing him... Tears pooled in his eyes and he furiously blinked them away.

“Must I continue to make it an order?”

“It was...very painful.”

Raoul could finally see a trace of emotion on Cal's face, but still he pushed forward. If showing vulnerability concerned Cal, perhaps it was simply a matter of showing the boy that such vulnerability did not matter. He would not remain calm and approachable, no matter what emotions the boy showed, thus giving Cal a sense of security.

“Did you feel shame?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“It was not my actions that caused the situation, and nor could I control it, so there is no point to feeling shame.” It was a lie! He did feel shame, he felt shame every waking hour, but a Blondie would not accept or understand that, so he said what he was expected to say.

“If you know this, why are you allowing the situation to affect you?”

Cal tried to articulate truthfully. “I cannot stop seeing...feeling those... hands on me. I cannot forget the pain or the...the sounds of them.”

He rose suddenly, a huge breach in etiquette as Raoul had not given him leave to do so, but he needed to move and put some distance between them. He tried to explain himself logically, so as not to embarrass himself in front of a Blondie and lose all respect.

“I have watched such things before with the pets, sometimes I was required to briefly participate to assist in training, but this...this was different. I

never felt a reaction like this during those times and I...it...I cannot say how I feel about it, exactly, and that is what...what confuses me.”

“You were never subjected to the act of intercourse during training as the pets were, therefore you could remain detached. Also, the pets can feel pleasure during such things. They can enjoy sex, which helps remove feelings of shame or embarrassment. Their pain, if there is any, can quickly become pleasure, while you, as a eunuch, could feel nothing but the harsh brutality of it.”

Cal turned to Raoul. “This is why I should be reset. So, that I can go back to when I did not know such things, feel such things. I am ineffective the way I am now and can offer no assistance to anyone.”

“Do you believe that suffering a traumatic experience makes you decreases your worth?”

“Yes!”

“Is that what you told Riki when he was suffering from his experiences?”

“I...what...I cannot speak of that!”

"Iason has told me of the headaches that the pet suffered; the trauma of trying to remember a past that he had no prior knowledge of. It must have been very difficult for him to learn he was different than what he thought.”

“Yes, it was. It has been very difficult for him, but he is fine because he is strong and proud and can move past such things and...”

“Not without your help.”

Cal blinked, twice. "P...pardon?"

"Would Riki have been able to move past these things without your help? Was it not you who learned of his true origin? Wasn't it you who, under the guise of being a tutor for him, helped him focus less on the trauma and more on the truth? You were even the one who learned where he and Iason had been taken, yet you do not see any of this as a triumph of your skills?"

"Because I could be calm!" Cal cried, and then slapped a hand to his mouth, horrified. "I...I apologize, sir, I..."

"Do you think he could have gotten through all of that without your support, knowing how easily he allows his emotions to rule him? I know Riki, and he would have self-destructed from the knowledge that he was not who he prided himself to be. He would have waged an internal battle that could easily have spilled out into a real battle with all those around him, making matters so much worse, but he did not. Instead he listened to you and allowed you to guide him."

"Any Furniture would have done the same..."

"Riki despises everyone with an unrivaled passion, his exceptions are you, Iason and Katze. While he consistently rebels against the latter two, to you he will listen. Why do you suppose that is?"

Cal didn't know why Riki listened to him half the time, he was only grateful when he did. And it wasn't like the mongrel behaved all the time either, many times he simply ignored Cal's warnings or advice. Raoul didn't understand that the same traits he had just mentioned about Riki was the reason Cal needed control over his emotions, because without it he could not be firm, or persistent, he could not be supportive or punishing.

"Whether I am Furniture or a tutor I cannot allow myself to be distracted. I must maintain peace and order. I must do as my master commands without hesitation, but...now...now I have difficulty even allowing..."

He could not deal with anyone touching him, and while few were demonstrative with Furniture, Riki was different. Riki liked to grab his hand or pat his back. Riki sometimes draped an arm over him or even hugged him. Cal had mixed emotions about those times, feeling awkward because it was a break in protocol, and yet it also felt really lovely. There were even a few times when he found himself looking forward to it. Now, even the thought of Riki doing that made his stomach churn. How would Riki react if Cal threw up on him or flinched away from him?

"Cal?"

Realizing he had been lost in his thoughts and fears and had not finished answering Raoul's question, he stammered. "M...my mind wanders to things I...I do not wish to recall and I feel things that I do not wish to feel. I am useless this way."

Raoul studied Cal quietly for several long moments, and then he slowly nodded. "Very well. I can wipe your mind for you. However, I cannot promise to target those specific memories, and you may lose more than you wish."

"That is acceptable."

Was Cal truly this desperate, Raoul wondered? Truly this brave? "As I will be circumventing the regular channels for such a procedure, you must get permission from Iason for me to do so."

Cal's already pale face grew whiter. He could not request such a thing without having to explain why. "C...can you not simply tell him it was necessary, or find a reason..."

"You wish me to *lie* to your master?"

Cal shook his head, appalled at himself for suggesting such a thing. "N...no. Of course not."

"Indeed." Raoul rose. "You may contact Iason at any time to request permission for the wipe, or it can wait until you return home, but I cannot adhere to your request without Iason's allowing it." He smirked. "You know how he is about those who meddle with what belongs to him."

Cal's shoulders slumped. "Yes."

"Go to the kitchen and fix yourself something to eat." Perhaps if he prepared the food himself, Raoul thought, Cal would finally eat. "Peter will not mind."

"As...yes, sir." Cal turned to go but Raoul called him back. "Yes?"

“Can I trust you to behave yourself and not make any further attempts at termination while you are under my care?”

Cal’s voice grew softer, his eyes remained lowered. “Yes.”

Raoul had the sudden urge to pat the boy on the head but denied himself. Cal was not a pet and to do such a thing to Furniture, even a former one, would be considered disrespectful. Still, Cal could be inexplicably cute sometimes; he would have made a very good pet.

“Good. I must go tuck Shira in and then will be going out. You will eat something and then return to bed until your fever is gone.”

“Yes, sir.” Cal rose and stepped through the interior portal to take him to his kitchen where he quickly went to the food preparer. He ordered a bowl of broth, removed it from the machine and drank it as quickly as he could, while trying not to burn his tongue. His stomach churned almost immediately but he managed to keep it down, then he set the bowl in the cleansing station and returned to the guest room.

He sat down on the bed and wrung his hands. What was he going to do? What could he do? He was already breaking so many rules by not telling Iason the truth and if Iason learned of his deception he would surely have him terminated. In order to have this episode removed from his mind he would have to get permission from his Master, but he knew that Iason would demand to know why.

He moved to the computer console, brought up the medical site and started scrolling medications that might affect someone’s memory, but there were very few of them and they were severely regulated. They seemed to work more as an anesthesia than an actual mind wipe, so he probably wouldn’t be able to remove specific memories.

Biting his lip, he put a call into Katze, waited and a moment later the familiar scarred face appeared on the screen.

“Yes?”

“Hello.”

“Hi.”

“H...how are you?”

“Busy.”

“Oh. I’m sorry to bother you, I’ll let you get back to work...”

“I have a few minutes,” Katze assured, concerned at how pale Cal was.
“What’s going on?”

“I...” Cal’s hands curled in his lips. “It’s nothing. I’m sorry to bother you. Good-bye.” He disconnected the call, then realized how rude his actions appeared and started to make the call again to apologize, only to immediately receive an incoming call. “Open transmission,” he said reluctantly and lowered his eyes from Katze’s narrow gaze.

“Did you just hang up on me?”

“I...I’m sorry. You’re busy and...”

“I am busy, which means I don’t have time to come over there and knock some sense into you. Now tell me what’s bothering you.”

“I...I just wondered if you...if you knew of any....um...medication that might...affect someone’s...um...memory.”

“Aren’t they listed on the medical site?” Katze asked, his concern growing even as he maintained a neutral tone and expression. What the hell was Cal up to now?

“Yes, but...I wondered if you knew of any others?”

“What kind are you looking for, exactly?”

“Just...just something to...um...help someone forget something.”

Katze's heart thumped in sympathy. "No," he lied. "I don't know of any, sorry."

"Oh."

"You could ask Raoul?" Katze knew it was dangerous even suggesting such a thing, but he had a feeling Cal had already tried that route or he wouldn't be going through him.

"I would...I mean... Permission might be required for such a thing."

"Ah. Well, it's probably better that way. Someone may end up losing everything."

It would be worth it, Cal thought, but did not tell Katze that.

"Listen, why don't you come stay with me for a few days?"

"Oh no, you are busy."

"It's because I'm busy that I need you."

Cal felt a knot of tears form in his throat, he was now also becoming a burden to Katze who was worried about him. "I'm fine. I'll have to go... back soon. I will be fine."

"Do you want me to come by later?"

"No. I'm fine. Thank you."

He wasn't fine, damn it! Katze swallowed his frustration. "Okay. Well, call me if you need to, don't worry about the time, I don't keep normal hours anyway."

"Thank you, Katze. I'll sign off now."

"Okay."

Cal ended the transmission then continued to stare at the screen. It was an odd feeling having a situation that he could not find a proper solution for. This had never happened to him before, and was yet another sign that he was no longer worthy of his position. He glanced towards the window, then shook his head. He had promised Raoul, hadn't he?

He returned to the bed and lay down, touched his own forehead and decided he very well may have a fever, though he actually felt cold. He pulled the covers over him and closed his eyes, ignoring the tear that slipped out as he tried to sleep.

Chapter 7

Summary for the Chapter:

Katze goes on a date with Raoul.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm updating again so soon because this is a quick chapter and also since I have already received such lovely comments on the last chapter that immediately puts me in a generous and giving mood. :-)
Soooo..how do ya like me now? LOL

Raoul appeared in the doorway of Katze's office, amused when the red-head barely glanced at him. He was a Blondie, so no one dared interrupt him, and he'd taken the time to look around the warehouse and distribution area that posed as a front for Iason's black-market trade. He was feeling restless after dealing with the nonsense at the med-center and decided to track down his favorite red-head.

"I don't have time for you," Katze stated as his fingers flew over his computer board.

"I'll wait," Raoul decided, wandered in, and pulled a chair from the wall over to the console, then settled down in it. "Pretend I'm not even here."

Katze did just that, he accepted three calls in which he gave strict, firm instructions, all the while his fingers calculated figures, processed information and rerouted files.

"There's no leeway here," Katze said into his headset. "Ten-evening at the pier. One minute off and the deal is voided. No return deposit and they'll be removed from the list for future contact."

Raoul listened, intrigued.

“That's your problem,” Katze said. “Get it done.” He disconnected the call with a touch of his finger to the nub in his ear, then pulled up a 3D hologram schematic of the west side of Midas. “I'm really busy, Raoul, can whatever you need wait?”

“Later then?”

Katze glanced at him, scowled at the hologram in obvious distraction, and nodded. “Sure, fine.” Anything to get the Blondie out of his office.

“It's a date.” Raoul smiled and rose. “I'll expect to see you at Gerard's in an two hours. Wear something suitable.”

Katze waved at him absently as he found the details he was searching for and reached for his data pad to make the notation. His head came up sharply as the door to his office closed. “Date? Wait, what?” He rose and hurried to the door, but Raoul was already gone. Did he just agree to go on a date with an Elite? “Fuck me!” He slammed the door and stomped back to his console. “Fucking, sly, sneaky, conniving bastard.”

“Who's a sly, sneaky, conniving bastard?”

Katze glanced back at his office manager Kent who peered in from the door he had just slammed. “No one, never mind. Where are we with the Asralil shipment?”

“Be done in an hour.” Kent stepped in with his data pad. “We're running low on Macen Distributors so I've put request in for more stock.” He offered the data pad to Katze who approved the request and gave it back.

“Do we have any lines on memory drugs?”

Kent tilted his head. “Boosting or Depleting?”

“The kind that make you forget.”

“Well, we have a few that can cause temporary memory loss, for a day or so, but it usually just affects the last twelve or twenty-four hours.”

“Nothing that targets specific memories?”

“Not that I’m aware of, but I can make some inquiries off world if you think it might be something worth pursuing?”

Katze shook his head. “No, I was just curious.

Kent nodded. “I also checked on that other matter?”

“Yeah?”

“You were right, two new crewmen admitted to taking a bribe to bring off-worlders in using two of our temperature regulated crates.”

Katze nodded, so that was how the people of Avalon had managed to get their people in undetected and set up that ambush for Iason and Riki. “I assume they didn’t give up the information freely?”

“No, we had to work them over for quite a while.”

“Are they still breathing?”

“More or less.”

Katze rose and walked to the window. There wasn’t much of a view this time of night; there wasn’t much of one in the day time either, just the warehouse yard and a few other structures nearby. He’d vetted all the people who worked for him, even down to the machine workers and stock boys, but sometimes good people could be turned by money. Loyalty was fast becoming a scarce commodity and it made his job that much harder.

“Do you want to know their names?”

“No.” He’d rather not know in case it was someone he actually liked. Still, he had to send a clear and definitive message, so that this sort of thing didn’t happen again. That was how Iason wanted it and it was also the only thing about his job that he despised. “Finish it.”

Kent nodded, moved to the door then paused and turned back. "You look exhausted. When was the last time you slept?"

Katze shrugged, unable to answer the question.

Kent grinned. "Maybe you need a memory booster."

"Yeah, maybe." He watched Kent leave, sighed heavily and moved to his wall cabinet to pull out a small bottle of liquid.

Maybe Iason was right and he did need a vacation, because he couldn't seem to get rid of this damn headache that he'd had for the last few days. He dabbed the oil on his temples and across his forehead and inhaled deeply the minty scent, then returned to his console and continued to work.

Raoul nodded to the waiter who poured his wine and crossed one leg over the other, Gerard's, like most places in Midas, was always open and serving. He'd selected a lounge booth in the high-class restaurant, private, secluded and away from prying eyes. It had been a surprise that Katze had agreed to the meet up, but he could admit that he had taken advantage of the red-head's distraction to solicit the date. He had no doubt whatsoever that the black-market dealer had cursed his name once he realized what he had agreed to.

This put a smile on Raoul's face, even as he spotted his waiter returning with a strikingly handsome man in a black dress suit, with silver and blue brocade across the cuffs and collar. "You're late," he stated as Katze settled into the seat across from him.

"I told you I was busy," he retorted and requested a coffee from the waiter.

"Why don't you have some wine?" Raoul suggested as he picked up the bottle that he had asked the waiter to leave at the table, and poured a generous serving into Katze's glass. "It's very good."

Katze ignored the gesture “I’m fine.” He’d always disliked the smell and taste of alcohol, something left over from his childhood, but he would drink socially when he had to. Right now, he didn’t have to. Besides that, he preferred to be in control at all times. He remembered his manners and asked. “How was your joining with Jupiter?”

“Refreshing.”

Good. Great, so why was the Blondie bothering him then? “Why did you ask to meet here?”

“They have an excellent menu and I was in the mood for ambiance.”

“So, why not bring one of your pets here?”

“Unlike *your* master, I know the purpose of a pet and their place. Bringing them to this sort of establishment is not only unwise, but would be considered offensive.”

“But you’ll bring Furniture?”

“Former Furniture,” Raoul returned glibly. “As you are constantly reminding me.

Katze unfastened his tunic jacket and sat back against the seat as the waiter returned with his coffee. Since he wasn’t getting out of this, he may as well enjoy it.

“So, what is this experiment you need my help with?”

“No, no. That would be telling.” Raoul sipped his wine and peered over his glass at Katze. “Tell me about your day?”

“That would be telling.”

Raoul smiled, no other person would dare respond in such a way, well except for perhaps Riki, but Riki’s comments were always rude and filled with distain. He was easy to rile whereas Katze managed to say such things without a trace of emotion in his face or voice, giving no clue if it was

meant as an insult, sarcasm or anything other than a basic, plain statement of fact. A negative response from the other person, in this case Raoul, would be a show of insecurity and weakness. Iason had trained this one very well.

“What of that meet you were arranging?”

“I can’t discuss that.”

“Why not?”

Katze merely stared at him.

“Ah. Well then, how about your plans for the next few days? Do you have any?”

Katze sensed a trap. “I’m working.”

“All day? Both days? Nights too?”

“What...” Katze began just as two steaming plates of food were sent before them. “I didn’t order anything.”

“I ordered for us,” Raoul returned as he picked up his fork. “Their food is quite delicious and nutritious.” He smiled again. “That’s a rhyme I learned from Peter. He uses it to get my pet to eat when she is being difficult.”

I’m not your pet...Katze swallowed the retort that jumped to his lips and silently chastised himself. Why was it he could remain calm and cordial and in control with everyone except this one Blondie? How was it that Raoul managed to push all his buttons at once?

Instead of complaining he obediently tasted a piece of fish and almost sighed as the delicious morsel practically melted in his mouth.

“Well?”

“It’s good.”

“Yes, it is.”

Katze took another bite, and supposed since Raoul had started the conversation he needed to continue, although why they were making small talk at all was beyond him. “I assume you will also be busy over the next few days?”

“Well, I had hoped to make a trip to Mirial 5, they have some samples for me.”

“Ah. Well...safe trip.” Katze shoved another bite of food into his mouth as he couldn't think of anything else to say. He rarely felt nervous and had always been a smooth talker enough to find a way out of any situation. Raoul however, made him flustered and he didn't know why.

He had to tread carefully here. Raoul was an Elite, he demanded a certain amount of respect, which Katze was trained to give, but he couldn't handle it with his usual finesse because the Blondie had a way of turning Katze's words back on him or deliberately assuming a hidden meaning that Katze had in no way intended.

His habit of brutally, sometimes cruelly eliminating such suggestions also would not work on Raoul, as Raoul simply considered such a reaction fodder for his own amusement and would continue to prod and poke until Katze said or did something he would later regret. The worst thing a man could be was predictable. Creating a routine could get you killed in the black-market business.

“I was also thinking of stopping by Galepon.” Raoul watched as Katze's fork paused in midair for half a millisecond, before continuing to his mouth. “I have a very good acquaintance there in the acquisitions department.”

Katze set his fork down and wiped his mouth with his napkin. He had been trying to find a legitimate, trustworthy contact for Galepon for the last five years, but all of his attempts had fallen short. Their import and export security was beyond tight and they refused to allow any products to leave the planet without the proper market price and valid documents of sale in place. Their products were in high demand and would fetch a fortune on the

black market, if you could get someone on the inside to transport. Even Iason had been unable to break through their trade security.

“I see.” Giving nothing away, Katze, as a concession, reached for his wine and took a sip. “Mmmmm, you're right, it is good wine. Good wine, good food and good company. You're spoiling me, Raoul.”

Raoul gazed at Katze thoughtfully. Clever man, he thought in Katze's use of subtle flattery. “Yes,” he agreed. “It is a shame you are so busy, I thought you might like to make the trip with me.”

Katze wasn't an idiot, he knew when he was being played, and as much as he would love to have the contacts for Galeon, he wasn't about to be in debt to Raoul.

“Yes, shame about that.” He continued eating.

Raoul chuckled. “Oh, give it up. You know you want to come with me.”

Delusional, psychopathic, arrogant... “I would actually,” Katze admitted. “Regretfully I *do* have to work.” And he didn't want to be alone on a transport or off planet with Raoul.

“Yes.” Raoul continued to sip his wine and gazed at Katze over the rim of his glass. “Iason has trained you well, you will not give an inch or show any weakness. That's good, however your obstinacy is interfering with my plans.”

Katze stared blankly at him.

“Must I make it an order or involve Iason?”

“Iason has given me instruction that our...deal cannot interfere in my work for him.” Katze reminded quietly as he reconsidered his options. He didn't want Raoul bringing Iason into this, he'd agreed to do be available to Raoul, and Iason would be annoyed if he was contacted over something like this. “I really do have to work.” He paused as if considering, although he

knew his schedule to the minute. “I might be able to find some time on in the afternoon the day after tomorrow.”

Raoul considered. That would not give them enough time for a trip to Galeon, as he had a full day of meetings and some lab work to finish the day after that, but they might have enough time for the trip Mirial 5. It was a compromise, and not in Katze’s favor. Because of this, Raoul also made a compromise.

“Well, the samples can wait,” he decided. “I’d rather you...”

Katze lifted his head from his food as Raoul seemed to just stop. “Hey.” He waved his hand in front of the android. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

Raoul rose. “I must go to a meeting. I will contact you regarding our discussion.”

Katze had no chance to reply as he watched Raoul walk away. That was odd. Shrugging he continued to eat and tried to think of another way to set up a trade with Galeon.

Chapter 8

Summary for the Chapter:

Iason is back from the joining and needs to deal with Bean

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you to all who commented and to those that have followed me over from FF as well. I hope that you enjoy this next chapter as well!

“What's gotten into you?” Riki demanded when Bean set a plate of pastries in front of him, without Riki having asked. He'd returned from his time with Katze to find that Yielā was still sleeping, although she had moved to Cal's room, and Bean was cleaning the kitchen. Iason would be done the joining within the hour, and Riki decided to stay up and wait for him.

“I thought you would be hungry,” Bean returned quietly. “I can bring you something else if you prefer?”

Riki's eyes narrowed. “You're up to something,” he decided. “You're never this nice to me. What's going on?”

“I am simply doing my job.”

Riki picked up one of the pastries and held it out to the boy. “*You* eat first.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Eat it.”

Bean's lips thinned, then his expression returned to his usual blankness as he stepped forward accepted the pastry and took a bite. He chewed, swallowed, then stepped back and lowered his eyes. “Will that be all?”

Riki's eyes never left Bean's face. “Yeah, sure.”

Bean bowed his head turned and walked away. In the privacy of the kitchen, he slid to the floor, pulled his legs up to his chin and started to shake. The waiting was killing him. Why hadn't Master Iason punished him when he was home, even for such a brief time? Why was the pet even speaking to him? Didn't they know what he had done? The Pet's suspicion had hit so close to the truth because of what he had done to Cal that Bean almost lost it there in front of the mongrel. But he had maintained. He had managed to escape with his dignity intact.

He wanted his punishment, needed it so that he could know what his future would be. He needed to know if Master Iason would allow him to stay, or if he would be terminated. If he couldn't stay he would rather be dead. Anything would be better than having to leave this place.

Perhaps Raoul had not told Iason about what he had done? Could the Blondie have forgotten? Or maybe they couldn't find Cal and so there had been no evidence of his crime? Ranaya Ugo was a despicable place after all and Cal probably would not have survived more than a few hours. He was such a sensitive and emotional Furniture; totally unsuitable for a Blondie of Iason Mink's character.

On trembling legs, he rose and looked through the doorway to see The Pet was eating the pastries. So cold, so brutish and uncouth. It was The Pet's fault for making him feel this way. It was The Pet who had demanded Cal be brought back. If Bean had any hope of staying he had to be better, he had to get The Pet to like him so the Master would keep him, and so he would not have to leave. Now that Cal was out of the way, Riki would have to let him dress and bathe him and do all the things Furniture was supposed to do for a pet.

He flinched as he heard the notification chime of someone entering Master Mink's personal elevator and quickly composed himself. Hurrying to the door he was prepared when Iason stepped through and handed over his cape.

Riki glanced up at Iason and felt his heart flip over in his chest. He'd tried to pretend that he wasn't worried, because it was well past the time when the joining should have been over, but he had assumed that someone would

have notified them if there had been an issue with Iason. At least, he'd had to hang onto that thought because otherwise he would be a basket case wondering if Iason was trapped in the Deep Sleep again.

He'd also secretly wondered what exactly Jupiter did with the Blondies during the joining. Did Jupiter now know everything about them? Had Iason been changed or reprogrammed or whatever it was that happened to Elites? Was Iason still Iason?

Iason's time with Jupiter had been mostly fulfilling, although there had been a few difficult, almost painful moments when Jupiter had explored too deeply, but the minute he was released all he could think about was getting back to Riki. Unfortunately, he had been surrounded by many of his brothers who claimed an urgency in speaking with him; part of the problem with being Iason Mink is that even a few days away caused chaos within the inner workings of Tanagura.

The other Elites may question his choice of pet and some of his personal actions, but no one could argue that he was the valued leader of the Syndicate. Even though Orphe had taken over for a while, that Blondie had been ill-equipped to maintain the order that Iason had, and seemed more concerned about gaining power than doing his duty for the betterment of Tanagura.

Iason had finally managed to deal with this issues, but he had been filled with worry, not at all sure that his lover had returned or that someone had not snatched Riki away again. "Riki," he said, so relieved to see the mongrel lounging on the sofa he nearly collapsed.

Hearing his name spoken in that way caused relief to spread through Riki. Iason was still Iason, and knowing that, he pretended disinterest. "Oh, is it that time already?" He popped another piece of pastry in his mouth, rose and stretched erotically, effectively exposing his bare midriff. "I was just going to bed, night."

Iason was across the room and devouring Riki's lips in seconds, savoring the sweet taste of the pastries and the essence of Riki's own flavor. When he

finally let Riki breathe, Iason growled hungrily down at him. “You won’t be sleeping any time soon, pet.”

Riki’s lips parted to protest the term but again his mouth was captured and he had no choice but to submit. When he was picked up into Iason’s strong arms, his legs wrapped around the Blondie’s waist and he felt Iason’s startled pause.

“What?” Riki asked innocently.

He was glad that Iason was back, not only because he was horny as hell, but he’d actually missed Iason’s presence. It had been a very long day and night full of questions and choices, memories and reality. He wanted to put it all out of his mind and let himself be fucked blind.

Iason slowly smiled. Usually Riki hated being carried to their bedroom, had something changed with his beloved mongrel or had Riki simply stopped denying his feelings? He caught Riki’s lips again as he continued to walk, then once in their bedroom, dropped Riki unceremoniously on the bed felt a shot of amusement as he listened to the young man yelp.

“I need you, Riki,” he stated in a way he never had before as he quickly got rid of his regalia.

Riki knelt on the bed and tossed off his shirt, eager for the sex to begin. “Well, here I am,” he retorted, leaning back to shrug out of his jeans, leaving him gloriously naked before the Blondie. “What’s taking *you* so long?”

Iason growled at Riki’s unexpected playfulness and leapt onto the bed, crushing Riki in his arms. “It will not be easy or quick,” he warned as he licked his way up Riki’s body, even as his hands, now free of the encumbering gloves caressed him urgently. “I may hurt you?”

Riki gasped as he stared into Iason’s wild looking eyes. “Was it...bad?”

“Some.”

Riki knew it wasn't fun to have Jupiter in his head, he couldn't imagine how it was for Iason who had absolutely no barrier against the AI. "Then do me, whatever way you need it. Do me."

Iason captured Riki's mouth again and began to do just that.

Iason caressed Riki's face with a wonder that astounded him. Usually Riki begged, at some point, to be released from Iason's need for multiple rounds of sex, but this time Riki had managed to match him stroke for stroke and had not complained even once. His relief that Riki had not run away had been palatable, so much so that had he the capacity to weep he probably would have when he found his lovely mongrel seated on that sofa in his home.

He quietly rose from the bed, so as not to disturb his exhausted mate, then slipped into a robe and stepped out of the room. Moving down the hall he opened the door to what had once been the pet room, but had been turned into a bedroom and office for Cal. It now housed the young alien girl from Riki's home planet and she was sleeping soundly on the bed, the window was open and a breeze flowed in to cool the room.

He silently moved to the adjacent wall, pressed his hand to the panel to reveal a selection of instruments that were left over from the days he had been training Riki. He selected one, then crossed the room again and closed the door. Heading downstairs, he moved without sound as he crossed the living room and walked through the kitchen to the Furniture's quarters.

Entering Bean's room, he stood over the bed that held the small, sleeping boy. When Katze had revealed what had been done to Cal, he had been angry, but too distracted by his need to be with Jupiter to deal with it at the time. On top of everything else he and Riki had been through the last few days, to come home to such shocking news was distasteful, to say the least.

Iason had sensed something in Katze's tone when he conveyed the news and suspected that the black-market dealer was holding back some details, but he did not ask under what circumstances Raoul had found Cal. Of course,

knowing Cal was at Ranaya Uugo was enough to tell him that his loyal Furniture had been subjected to the worst sort of situation.

He'd needed to have Riki first thing when he'd returned from seclusion, especially after so long away from him, but now that he was centered and sated, he had to deal with the issue of his new Furniture.

He reached down, grabbed Bean by the hair and yanked him out of the bed and to the floor. The boy cried out and then cower on his knees when he saw his Master's cruel eyes trained on him.

“M... Master! You're awake! I...I...”

“I am awake and fully aware of your actions. What do you have to say for yourself?”

Bean rose on shaky legs folded his hands in front of him and bowed his head. “I...I...”

“You came highly recommended to me, which was why I hired you, but you have been nothing but a nuisance for the last several months, and now you do this?”

“I apologize, sir!”

“Do you think an apology absolves you of your crime??”

Bean bit his lip, unsure how to answer, and then suddenly found himself held by the throat and hanging off the wall. “I... I did it for you, sir!”

Iason blinked slowly. “For me?”

“He...that Furniture had eyes for The Pet! He was unduly close and...and I was trying to protect you from s... such an indignity as having your pet stray!”

Iason dropped Bean, the boy gasped and gulped in much needed air, then held his breath as the Blondie suddenly crouched in front of him.

“You think Cal and Riki were having an affair?”

“I... I have no proof of that, but they were often...um...close and... touching each other. They...they spent hours in a room, alone and...” And Riki favored Cal, his cooking, his teaching, even helping him pick out his clothes, when it should have been Bean doing that!

Iason stood up slowly. “I see. If this is the case, then I shall have to get rid of you, for I can't have you spreading rumors that I cannot control my pet, can I?”

“No!” Bean scrambled to his feet and grasped Iason's robe. “It is Cal! He is the one that should be punished! He was....” Bean's words brutally ended as Iason slapped him hard across the face.

“How *dare* you!” He hit the boy again and Bean flew back against the wall, then curled up into a ball as the first strike of the whip Iason pulled from his pocket lanced across him.

“Please, Master! Please! I was only trying to-aaahhhhh!”

Iason growled as he continued to whip the weeping boy. “You are Furniture! You do not have the authorization to make such decisions!”

“Iason. *Iason*, stop! Ow, fuck!”

The sound of Riki's voice just barely pulled Iason out of his rage, but not enough to stop his next swing. He was appalled when the strap sliced through Riki's upper arm as he put himself between Iason and Bean.

“Shit, asshole!” Riki cradled his arm, but kept Bean behind him. “That fucking hurt!”

Iason dropped the whip and strode to the mongrel. “Let me see,” he demanded grabbing Riki's injured arm. “Why did you get in the way? Why are you so foolish?”

“You were gonna kill him, that's why!” Riki barked, but took note of how gentle Iason was with his bleeding arm. He'd been woken by Bean's

screams and had only yanked on his jeans before he ran out of the bedroom. “What the hell has he done to deserve this?”

“This does not concern you, Riki,” Iason stated, his cold demeanor returning as he bent and picked up the whip again. “Go back to our room, I will return when this is finished and tend to your arm....”

“No,” Riki refused and lifted his hands. “This is not happening again.”

“Riki, you don't understand what he has done.”

“I don't care what he's done! I'm not going to let you kill another kid!”

“Kill...?” Iason repeated, confused and then recalled how upset Riki had been when he learned of Darryl's termination. “This is entirely different.” Iason's eyes narrowed on Bean, who now cowered behind Riki. “Tell him! Tell him what you have done. Let him learn the truth of your deception!”

Bean managed to get to his knees, and wiped at the tears on his face. “I... I'm sorry. P... please forgive me.” He glanced up at Riki then lowered his eyes again. “I t... thought you and Cal were.... misbehaving together.”

Riki's eyebrows rose. “Huh?”

“He claims that you and Cal were having an affair,” Iason stated, coldly. “To remedy the situation, he drugged Cal and sent him to Ranaya Ugo telling them he was a discarded pet.”

Riki's legs buckled and he dropped to his knees. No! Cal wasn't a pet, he was Furniture. Not only that he was a good kid, loyal and kind and funny; he was Riki's friend. “But....don't they....at that place don't they...?”

“Yes, they do, and Cal was no exception.”

“I'm sorry!” Bean cried. “I could not help myself! I...I am in love with the...with Riki. I should not be thinking these things but I am. I thought awful, sinful things and I could not stop these thoughts.” He prostrated himself in front of them. “Please forgive me!”

“You son of a bitch!” Riki screamed and lunged for Bean, but was restrained by a pair of slim, but surprisingly strong arms. He struggled, tossed his head back to scream at Iason, and found that it wasn't the Blondie that was holding him, but Yiela. “Fuck off! Let me go!”

“It is not his fault, Maku,” she said gently as she met his gaze. “He does not understand why he needs to be beside you, and so he has acted in this way.”

Riki stared at her as he remembered what the Queen said about his so-called power. “No! No, I... she said it didn't work like that. The Queen said...”

“It is a unique situation, Maku.” Yiela looked up at Iason. “It is not the boy's fault.”

“His choices are his own, regardless of how they were triggered,” Iason replied, coldly. “I will not allow this to go unpunished.”

Riki's rage was so intense he was nearly gasping to breathe through it. He wanted to beat the living shit out of Bean, but did he want him dead? The idea that this was why the little ferret had been so nice to him earlier infuriated him.

“Let me go,” he demanded and Yiela complied immediately. “Don't ever put your fucking hands on me like that again. If you ever, *ever* get between me and someone else I'll make you wish you were never born, female or not.”

“Apologies, Maku.”

He was actually surprised that Iason had not jumped all over the girl the minute she had touched him. One of Iason's stipulations of her visit here was that she wasn't to touch Riki, unless he was injured and in need of aid. The Blondie must be truly furious with Bean to have let it slide.

He rose to his feet and stared at the boy who had stopped weeping and had assumed a submissive position on his knees.

“I know what I have done cannot be forgiven, I do not expect forgiveness.” He kept his gaze lowered and squeezed his hands together to stop them from trembling. “If my death is necessary than I accept that decision, but ple...” He pulled back from the point of begging a second time. Furniture did not beg, he accepted his master's orders without question. “I would like to stay, to make up for my indiscretions any way that I can. I will understand if you prefer to send me away or terminate my life, but I truly could not help myself and my actions were not completely my own.”

Iason regained his composure and studied Riki who was still vibrating with anger. He would not give Riki the opportunity to hold another Furniture’s death against him, it angered him that Riki still blamed him for Darryl’s death. It had been the council’s decision to terminate Darryl, and they voted against Iason’s testimony to spare the boy. There had been nothing more that he could do once the decision had been made, and even Darryl had understood the reason for his sentence.

Now he had an issue with a second Furniture and that angered him almost as much as what had been done to Cal. He was also annoyed that Riki continued to use the termination of their former Furniture against him. What had happened to the trust they had managed to accumulate so far?

“Fine. I leave the decision in your hands, Riki.”

“Mine?” Riki’s head shot up, startled. “I don’t fucking want it.”

“Nevertheless, you have it. You seem to think I make decisions without considering the consequences, or that I have unlimited power over all other Elites, when the truth is I do not. Therefore, *you* will choose what happens to Bean and *you* will live with that choice.”

“Do you think I can’t?” Riki shot back.

He’d seen people die all the time in Ceres; had seen them raped and beaten and things happen that were far worse than death. Sometimes he was even responsible for it, because that’s how people lived in the slums, you’d give up your own mother if it meant your survival. Only, once he’d formed his gang that outlook changed somewhat. For Bison, the opposite was true, he

would have done anything to save them, and in fact he had. He'd given himself willingly to a Blondie to save all of their lives.

"I think you can do anything you put your mind to, Riki."

Yiela again spoke. "It is not his fault, Maku. You cannot control your power any more than this child can control his reaction to you. There is justification, if not for his actions then for his reasoning behind them."

"What is your decision, Riki?" Iason demanded.

"Do what you want." Riki sneered at Bean, still kneeling solemnly on the floor. "You think I give a shit now, one way or the other?"

"If you didn't you would not have stopped me earlier." Iason offered Riki the whip. "The choice is yours."

Riki snatched the whip and lifted it over his head, then paused when Bean's gaze met his directly, compliant, accepting and remorseful.

"Maku..." Yiela began.

"Shut up! Shut the fuck up!" He whirled on her. "Do you know what he did? Do you have any fucking clue what he did to Cal?"

Yiela lowered her head, obediently. "Your will be done, Maku."

"Stop calling me that!"

Riki threw the whip across the room in a rage because he couldn't use it on Bean and he wouldn't use it on Yiela. He'd become soft, living with Iason, compliant, just like a pet and it pissed him off. He hated the Furniture, had always hated him and now he had a valid reason to get rid of him. Then why couldn't he use the whip?

He spun back and grabbed Bean by the hair. "Get up you little fucker!"

Bean struggled to his feet as Riki's hand moved to the boy's arm and dragged him out of the room, through the kitchen and living area and up

onto the balcony. Seeing Riki's intent Bean started to struggle.

"No! Master! Please! Not that way! You can kill me, but please not that way!"

"You think you get to choose?" Riki snarled as he wrestled the frantic boy closer to the edge. "Did Cal get to choose before you sent him to that place? Did you give him a fucking choice?"

"Please no! Please!" Bean's Furniture demeanor dissolved into a fit of screaming sobs as Riki reached an arm beneath the struggling boy's legs and lifted him. Bean's arms flew to Riki's neck in a panic. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I didn't mean it! I didn't mean it! Master Iason, please! Please!"

Yiela stood with both hands at her throat as Riki hefted Bean over the solid railing barrier and the Furniture's struggles ceased once he was suspended over the vast expanse of Eos.

"P...please," he whispered. "I...I'll do anything. Please, not this way."

"Riki."

Iason spoke his lover's name quietly and without emotion. He suspected that Riki would not really drop the boy, for that would be a horrifying death indeed, the paperwork alone would take him days to sort through. However, if he was wrong he needed to prevent what was happening. He had given Riki the choice over Bean's punishment, but he could not allow Furniture to be dropped off his balcony and create a true uproar in Eos.

"Do you think Cal was this scared? Do you think he was hoping just to die and have it be over?" Riki stared hard into Bean's tearful, terrified eyes, his hatred pure and clear for the boy to see. "You are nothing, do you hear me, you are less than nothing. You deserve to die. You deserve everything I decide to give you."

Riki watched the terror in Bean's eyes turn to despair.

“I’m s...sorry.” Bean whispered, then spotted the ledge close by and in a panic tried to lunge for it. The boy had slipped out of Riki’s arms before the mongrel realized what was happening and, even as he grabbed for the smaller body, he saw the young boy fall.

“No!” Riki reached out frantically as both Yielia and Iason rushed to the barrier. “NO!” He had not really intended to drop Bean, he’d just been so angry and wanted to scare him as he expected Cal had been scared.

A soft indigo glow suddenly appeared around Bean and his descent was halted, then slowly, oh so slowly he began to rise. Riki and Iason glanced back and saw Yielia on her knees, her brow covered in sweat and her hands raised upwards as the light of a thousand amethysts burst from her finger tips. When Bean was high enough, Iason grabbed him and hauled the trembling boy back onto the balcony as Riki ran to Yielia, just before she collapsed.

“How...how did you?” he began as he cradled her in his lap. “Why?”

“Your...will be...done,” she gasped and then quickly passed out.

“Hey! HEY!” Riki shook her. Was she dead? “Yielia? Wake up!”

“I suspect her actions exhausted her, Riki,” Iason stated as he tossed the shaking Bean into a chair, and then picked up the unconscious woman. “You had a similar reaction when you exerted your power the first time.”

“I...I did?” Riki followed Iason into the living area where he settled the alien girl on one of the twin sofas. “When?”

“When we were on Avalon on our way to the castle.” Iason turned to Riki suddenly and gripped his arms. “*What* were you thinking Riki?”

The enormity of what he had almost done hit Riki full on and he turned into Iason. “I...I wasn’t I...I didn’t...”

“I know. I know, my love.” Iason realized that Riki had been probably more horrified than any of them at what almost happened. He wrapped his arms

around the younger man who had started to shake. “It is not so easy to dole out appropriate punishment, is it? There are always regrets.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” Riki whispered and clung to the Blondie. “I’m just so...angry.”

“As am I.” He pulled back, cradled Riki’s face between his gloved hands and softly kissed him. “Riki, that woman cannot stay here.”

“Y...Yiela? Why?”

“If her power is found out it would be...Inconvenient.”

Riki glanced at Yiela and nodded. “Yeah. I didn’t know she could do that.”

“I knew she had some power, but not that much. If it were seen by anyone, she would be considered a threat.”

“Yeah.” Riki looked at Yiela again. He’d known she wouldn’t be able to stay very long, and he had only agreed to bring the girl because of the Queen’s wish, but still, she was his only connection to Avalon now. He glanced up at Iason and thought about his conversation with Katze earlier. “Maybe...maybe I should go away too? Maybe we should both go...?”

Iason’s arms tightened around Riki. “No. That is not an acceptable course of action.”

“Then I need her to stay, Iason. I need her to help me figure out who...what I am.”

“Very well, but she cannot stay here. I will set her up outside of the city and you can go to visit her.”

Riki pulled back and met Iason’s gaze. “You’re jealous again, aren’t you?”

“No, I am merely attempting to...” He blinked suddenly then stepped away from Riki. “I have to go to a meeting.”

“Now?”

“Yes. Jupiter has called a meeting for all of us.”

Riki touched Iason’s arm. “Does it mean trouble?”

“I’m uncertain.” Iason glanced towards the balcony where Bean sat quietly trembling, exactly where Iason had left him. “Do you wish me to take care of that?”

Riki followed Iason’s gaze, then shook his head. “No. I’ll do it.” He looked up at Iason again. “Is it really my decision? His punishment?”

“As long as it doesn’t create a stir, like throwing him off the balcony, yes.”

“Okay.”

Iason leaned down to kiss Riki good-bye and then left.

Chapter 9

Summary for the Chapter:

Riki visits Ranaya Ugo.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all for such wonderful comments it really makes a difference!

CHAPTER NINE

Bean sat on the sofa, stiff as a board trying not to tremble. Master Iason had left his punishment to The Pet and after what had happened on the balcony he wasn't at all sure how safe he was. He could handle scolding and beatings, even torture. He had claimed understanding that he might be terminated, but he didn't really want to die, and certainly not the way the mongrel had intended. The idea of being dropped off a building. He barely managed to suppress a shudder as he watched The Pet work on the main console.

Bean studied the long, slender fingers that quickly and expertly typed commands. He wasn't sure why The Pet wasn't using the voice option, which would be more efficient, but he didn't dare ask, because he didn't want to draw more attention to himself. Every now and then he caught the beginning of a verbal warning from the machine, a sure sign that whatever was being done was either covert or illegal. The Furniture rules were implicit that such activities be reported, especially when the breaches were made by a pet, but speaking up now might be the end of him so he held his tongue.

The mongrel had demanded the full details of what had been done to the Furniture Cal, how Bean had tricked him, drugged him and then sold him. The Pet had demanded to know how this could have happened as Cal

belonged to Iason and only a Master could purchase or sell Furniture. Bean had been surprised that Riki knew anything about Furniture rules, and was forced to admit that he had forged documents on behalf of Iason, which had not been closely examined as the people at Ranaya Uugo rarely bothered once a sale was made.

Bean felt no shame at fully confessing what he had done. Cal got what he deserved, he had been too close to The Pet and had been trying to usurp Bean's position. Bean was more upset to have been caught and forced to appear so vulnerable and shameful in front of Iason and worse, Riki. Bean hated himself for the feelings he could not control that had put him in this situation.

Why would anyone keep a pet Riki's age? Why would he, as Furniture be expected to care for an adult mongrel in such a fashion? Riki was uncouth, belligerent and broke the rules at every turn! He was ungrateful and rude and totally unworthy of an Elite of Master Mink's status.

Bean glanced up as the warning came again and he noticed that Riki had closed his eyes in thought as his fingers paused over the console. Riki did have a lovely resting face, soft and smooth, almost innocent looking. Bean had watched Riki sleep many times, whenever Master Iason was not at home. Long lashes over dark lids that held even darker eyes; eyes that seemed capable of staring into your very soul. It must be that loveliness in that darkness, that exquisite beauty, danger and pride that had attracted Master Mink to such a mongrel.

Bean caught himself, lowered his head. He hated Riki for doing this to him, for making him feel this constant anxiety. The alien female had mentioned that his feelings were not his fault, these feelings, and he had to agree. It was all Riki's fault. Riki's fault for seducing Master Mink and convincing the Elite to let a mongrel be his pet. It was Riki's fault for treating Cal so kindly and him so horribly. He would not have angered Master Iason if it was not for Riki acting like a whore he and making him feel this way. It was all Riki's fault!

"Bean!"

The furniture blinked and glanced at Riki, realized that the pet was no longer working on the console and that he had changed into a shimmering white and gold tunic, dark slacks and a long black drape coat. Bean couldn't help but stare, for Riki was beyond beautiful in these clothes.

"You're allowed out of the city, right? You can drive?"

"Y...yes. Of course. I often have to go on errands for Master Mink."

"Then come on." Riki turned and shouted. "Yiela!"

The young woman appeared almost instantly. "Yes, Maku."

"Riki. My name here is Riki. Don't make me repeat myself." He blinked as he realized how much his words sounded like something Iason would say and that added to his temper. "I mean...Try to remember, okay?"

She nodded. "As you wish, Riki."

Riki stared at her outfit of strategically placed scarves. Fuck it, it might work better this way. "Come with me." He glared at Bean. "You too, we're going for a drive."

Bean's eyes widened. "Without Master Mink's permission?"

"I have his permission, or did you forget that he left your punishment up to me?"

Bean nodded, returned to his room for a jacket and a moment later returned wearing the small tunic that matched his uniform. "Are you..."

"Don't talk!" Riki snapped as he strode towards the door. "Just shut up and follow."

Bean nodded timidly and did as he was told.

They entered Iason's personal garage, where the Blondie housed several different vehicles and Bean followed Riki over to the fanciest car Iason

owned. He slid into the passenger side as Bean settled into the front and Yielā climbed in the back seat.

“Let’s go already!” Riki ordered.

“W...where are we going?”

“Ranaya Ugo.”

Bean stiffened.

“Do you remember who it was you sold Cal to?”

“It was just the receiver manning the desk.”

Was Riki going to sell him to those people, because of what he had done to Cal? He’d rather have gone over the balcony. He swallowed, hard as they pulled up to the garage gate and he showed his credentials. Once they were out of the garage he asked.

“Are...are you going to sell me to him? A...A pet can’t sell Furniture. You can’t...”

Riki glared at the young, trembling boy. “Iason said you’re my problem to deal with, so I’m gonna deal with you my way.”

Bean bit his lip and lowered his eyes, refusing to cry anymore. He knew he deserved all of this, knew that what he had done was unconscionable, but The Pet was such a dark force, worse than the Blondies because there was no guessing what he might do.

“Yes,” he returned quietly. “Your way.”

Riki nodded, spotted a pair of sunshades in the side console and slipped them on, they hid most of his face as they were sized for a Blondie. They had no issues escaping Eos, as Furniture could go anywhere on his Master’s orders and Bean’s registration number was all that was required. What would have taken him four or five hours on his bike took only an hour and ten minutes with the high-end vehicle to get to their destination. Once they

arrived Riki stepped out, pulled Yielia from the vehicle and then shoved Bean in front of them.

“Tell them we’re here to make a sale.”

Bean blinked, glanced at Yielia who showed no expression at the news she would be sold, then he moved into the main building. Ranaya Uugo held neither the future architecture of Tanagura nor the rich decadence of Midas. Looking at the dilapidated structure around them, which seemed to grow worse as they stepped inside, Riki could only say it was maybe two steps up from the slums.

A bored looking man sat at a walled in desk behind a security window, the booth was the only thing that looked reasonably solid.

“Yah, whadu want?”

“We’re here to make a sale.”

“Goods?”

Riki pulled Yielia forward and watched the man’s eyes light up greedily. “I want to talk to the man in charge.”

“Whut fur?”

“I don’t deal with desk warts.”

The man stood up angrily inside his tiny booth. “Whu yuse says to me?”

“Wonderful, it’s a deaf desk wart.” Riki glared at Bean. “You told me this was the best place for the best price, but it’s obviously just another rat hole.”

“I...” Bean was shocked by the superior way that The Pet looked at him, for the annoyance was worthy of a Blondie. He felt his head bowing in apology before he could stop it. “I was told they would. Perhaps the vendor in Midas would be better?”

Riki sniffed distastefully at the guard. “Yes, she’ll could bring in thousands a day in their brothels. I should have gone there to begin with. Fine, we’ll go back...”

The desk clerk was out of his little booth in a shot. “I bring the man. I bring him here. Yuse stays here.”

“You’ve got five minutes,” Riki warned and watched the man hurry off down the corridor behind him. Before the desk clerk was even out of sight Riki was inside the booth and working the console. Bean glanced at Yielā nervously who still seemed just as serene as before.

Just as they heard the clip-clop of boots coming from the corridor Riki darted out of the booth and took Yielā’s arm again.

“I’m Mr. Toles. What is this all about?”

The administrator was a more educated man, but he did not seem pleased to have been disturbed.

“She is.” Riki lightly shoved Yielā towards the man whose interest raised exponentially.

“I see. Where is she from?”

“Who knows? I won her, but I already have enough girls in my club. I was told you would offer the best price.”

The administrator walked around Yielā, poked and prodded her a bit, but Yielā remained still. “I’ll need her clothes off to confirm a price.”

“Fine, but not out here.”

“Surely you are not worried over the modesty of a whore?”

“I never show my full hand to outside players.” Riki glanced at the greedy looking desk wart. “It leads to unnecessary complications.” He watched Mr. Toles follow his eyes and see his employee practically salivating. “She’s for your eyes alone,” he continued. “Until a sale is confirmed, then you can

show her to whoever you want.” Riki eyed the lustful guard again. “I don’t offer freebies on any of my merchandise.”

Mr. Toles sighed impatiently, but his eyes were lit with money signs. They rarely got a woman here and an exotic, alien woman with such dark skin! He’d make thousands a day, he could just strap her up and let them have a go at her, could charge five times the normal amount. Yes, she would be a great profit indeed.

“Fine, we’ll go to my office then, will that suit you?”

Riki nodded and they followed him back down the corridor and through a secured door to a shambled hallway where most of the lighting was burned out and what lights were in use flickered ominously across a stark gray hallway.

“This way.”

Riki, Bean and Yielia followed quietly, trying to ignore the sounds of moans and screams coming from the other rooms. His hand on Yielia’s arm grew firm as he felt her start to shake. This place would probably be quite a shock for her.

In front of them, he watched two men exit a room laughing and as he passed the room he saw a figure on the bed, naked and bleeding. He blinked in surprise, then continued on. They stepped into a small room that was set up with a single computer console, a couple of chairs and a food storage unit.

“She better be worth it.” Mr. Toles clapped his hands together, turned to them with his lustful, greedy eyes on Yielia, and Riki’s fist bounced off his jaw, the administrator fell to the floor without another word.

“What are you doing?” Bean exclaimed, horrified as he bent to check the man’s pulse. “Was this your plan? To come in here and be arrested for assault?”

“No.” Riki crouched and unclipped the pass card on the administrator’s belt, then rose and peeked out the door. “My plan was to see the names of the people who paid to use Cal, but their system is coded so now I have a new plan.”

Bean grabbed at Riki’s arm. “Why? What difference does it make? What’s done is done and...”

Riki roughly shook the Furniture away. “It wasn’t done to you, was it?” he snarled. “I can change my mind and sell you to this guy and you can be the one who’s tied down and fucked!”

Bean paled and stumbled back into Yiel, who remained still and unmoving.

“Stay here and keep quiet.” Riki ducked out of the room and walked down the corridor to the room he had passed earlier from which the two men had exited earlier. He used the passkey and stepped inside a dimly lit six by ten-foot cell.

The door closed firmly behind him in a room lit with a blue light that held only a ratty bed and a wall full of instruments of sexual torture. The figure on the bed was naked, his back to the door and it was obvious that those instruments on the wall had been used on him multiple times, given the welts and scars on what had once been pristinely smooth skin.

“How do you want me?” the dulled voice asked.

“Standing,” Riki replied as he pulled off the shades. “Though you belong on your knees.” He saw the uncertain hitch in the scared, naked shoulders, then the figure rose and turned, his eyes wide.

“R...Riki?”

Riki had mixed feelings about seeing Orphe’s once prized pet. The beautiful young boy who had snubbed him at every turn now sported a bruised, scared body and a haggard face that had aged well beyond his years. This was not the Jana he remembered, but he felt no pity for his prior nemesis.

He knew that it had been Jana that had told Iason about him and Mimea, and because of that Riki had suffered horribly. Granted he had only been with the female to piss off Iason, to rebel against the Blondie's control, but he had not expected the severe punishment Iason delivered. He could blame Jana for ratting him out, but in the end, it had been Riki's decision to do it and he would have told Iason regardless, because that was the point after all; to shame the man who had shamed him.

Remembering what Jana once was caused him to recall what Orphe's new pets had tried to do to him when he had been the Blondie's prisoner, how he had suffered and struggled...He rolled his shoulders, shrugging off the memory. He was here for something more important than a petulant pet and he refused to allow even a grain of sympathy to touch him at the sight of the once proud young man.

Jana stumbled forward and threw himself at Riki's feet, desperately curling his arms around Riki's legs, almost throwing the former mongrel off balance. "Riki! Riki!"

Jana had always treated him with such disgust in Eos, Riki couldn't imagine why Jana would react this way, and he quickly kicked the pet back.

"Get off me!"

Jana remained on the floor, even as he looked up at Riki and tears filled his eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I just...a familiar face. It's been so long since I saw..." Jana wiped at his reddened cheeks and assumed a submissive kneeling position and waited silently for a command.

Riki tried to swallow his own revulsion at how complainant Jana had become but in a way, he could understand it. He knew how it was to have his choice ripped from him repeatedly, until submission was the only way to survive the hell that his life had become.

"I need information," Riki stated.

Jana kept his head lowered. "I don't know anything."

“Bullshit, you had spies all over Eos to feed you shit about me, so don’t give me that.”

Jana lifted his eyes, sadly. “I never leave this room. I don’t talk to anybody, I just lay here and wait for the next person to come in and use me. I can’t help you, Riki.” Again, tears formed in his eyes. “I wish I could. I wish I could be useful again.”

“Are you sure?” He had checked the records when the desk clerk left but they didn’t record names of the customers, only numeric codes. “You never heard anything about a Furniture being brought in a few days ago?”

“Furniture?” Jana looked up, startled. “Furniture don’t come here.”

“This one did, by mistake. I need to know who used him.”

Jana slowly rose settled on the bed, and not for the first time wished that he had at least a sheet or blanket to cover himself with. They kept the temperature in the room fairly warm so the whores did not get a chill or become sick, and covers were impractical as clients paid to use the whores, not sleep with them. “Furniture would be useless here, they can’t feel pleasure, they have no sexual organs. I don’t understand.”

“Fine. You don’t know anything. I’m wasting my time.” Riki started to turn away but Jana flew at him again and caught the edge of his cape.

“Wait! Is...is this for Iason? If I help him can he get me out of here?”

Riki shook him off again. “Iason doesn’t know I’m here.”

Jana crawled back onto the bed. “You’re still running around at will then, still disobeying your master?” A touch of the old Jana returned. “Why are you so special? Why does Iason care about you so much?”

“I haven’t a fucking clue, but he does and he’s told me to handle this thing with Cal.”

“Cal?” Jana’s head snapped up. “Cal was the Furniture that was sold to this place?”

Riki almost kicked himself for over playing his hand, but curtly nodded.

“No. Oh no.” Jana dropped his head in his hands remorsefully. “He was such a sweet kid, always so kind and cute. He used carry peppermints when he worked for Master Jahns and he’d always give me one when he saw me because he knew they were my favorite. That’s not right. This place...he... that’s not right.”

“Look, can you help me or not?”

Jana shrugged helplessly. “I can’t.” He watched Riki move towards the door and spoke again. “I can’t, but there is someone who might.”

Riki turned back. “Who? I need a name.”

“His name is Ren, he’s a guard here, and works the day shift.”

“What’s he look like?”

“He’s about six seven and bald on top. He has a long shaggy black beard. He’ll sometimes give extra food or medical treatments to those who have what he wants. If Cal came here he’d know about it, he processes all new whores.”

“What is it he usually wants?”

Jana shrugged. “What everyone who comes here wants.”

Riki considered his options. He wasn’t about to offer some guy sex just for information on the fuckers that hurt Cal, those days were behind him and besides, Iason would kill him. “He won’t exchange information for anything else, like credits?”

“No, they make pretty good pay here. They all just want to trade sexual favors.” Jana watched Riki’s expression. “I...I could do it for you. He likes me, he’s wanted to do me for a while, but I’m always on lock down, unless I’m being used, and he can’t enter my room unless he’s escorting a customer.”

“Why are you on lock down?”

Jana shrugged. “I used to try escaping, but I gave up after the last time when they broke both my legs.” Jana shuddered as he remembered being harnessed so he could still take customers, and had to endure the pain of his broken legs besides.

“Yeah.” Escaping was great, only if you didn’t get caught. Riki understood that well enough. “And what would you want in return for this favor?”

“Nothing. The only thing I could want you can’t give me.”

“You want out.”

Jana nodded. “I know you can’t do that. No one escapes from this place, and even if you are Iason Mink’s pet, it wouldn’t matter here.”

Riki needed that information, he needed to do this for himself and for Cal, who’d been wronged in the worst way. “What time does this guy come on?”

“Sometime just after sunrise, I think.” He paused and looked around his windowless room. “What is it like outside? I never know if it’s day or night here.”

Riki thought about how often he used the balcony in Iason’s condo, needing to see beyond the city even if he couldn’t reach it. The idea of not even having that almost made him shudder. “I’ll be back.” He moved to the door found it had locked again.

“You need a pass to get in and out.”

Riki used the administrator’s pass and the door opened. He glanced back at Jana. “I can’t promise you anything.”

Jana nodded. “I know. It’s okay.”

Riki pulled the shades back on, checked that the hallway was clear and quickly returned to the room where Bean and Yielia were waiting.

“Where have you been?” Bean demanded, forgetting his current situation and thinking only of the rules being broken.

“Shut up.” Riki crouched by the administrator who was still out cold. “There are no cameras in the hallway,” he said as he pulled the administrator up and hefted him over his shoulders and gave Yielia the pass. “We need to find an empty room.”

She nodded, stepped out into the hall and started listening outside of the doors. Any that she heard silence from she used the pass to open. The first cells three held young, naked men and the next one held a woman. Her heart went out to them, more so when Riki instructed her to close and secure the doors again, locking them back in.

Finally, she found an empty cell, just as the sounds of boots started towards them. They darted inside and closed the door. Riki dumped Mr. Toles on the dirty mattress then selected a set of restraints and a ball gag from the instrument.

“What are you doing?” Bean demanded, appalled.

“Did I say you could talk?”

Yielia stepped forward and helped Riki restrain the man to the bed. “What will happen to him?” she asked quietly, thinking of the poor souls in the other rooms.

“He’ll be fine, we just need him to disappear for a while.”

She nodded and straightened from her task. “Your will be done.”

“We can’t do this!” Bean insisted. “When they find him he’ll identify us! This will shame Master Iason, and blame him for allowing his pet to run wild...” Bean’s head whipped back by the force of Yielia’s blow and both he and Riki stared at her shocked.

“You are no longer deemed worthy of my consideration,” she stated in a calm, quiet voice. “My Lord has ordered you to hold your tongue, until he

gives you permission to speak and you will do so, youngling, or I shall make it impossible for you to speak ever again.”

Bean’s eyes grew wide but he remained silent.

Riki moved to the door and listened to confirm that the sounds of the boots had gone, then he carefully unlocked it and glanced out. The corridor was once again empty.

They headed back up the hall and were stopped just before the doors.

“This place is a joke,” Riki stated. “I won’t sell my goods here.”

“Where’s the administrator?”

“Said something about paperwork in his office. Now move, I want to wash the stench of this place off of me immediately.”

The guard paused suspiciously and Riki nudged Bean.

“We will have to hurry, sir, or we will miss your meeting with Master Lagnat.”

Hearing the name of the Chief Blonde of Midas had the appropriate affect and the guard stepped aside to allow them out the secured door. They walked past the front entrance where the desk wart eyed them suspiciously, then stepped outside and returned to their vehicle.

“Drive twenty minutes up the road and pull over,” Riki said as he started to pull off the cape and outside tunic. “Yiela, are you okay?”

Yiela nodded at Riki. “I am feeling relieved to be free of that place. It has so much harsh energy.”

“Yeah.” He paused. “I wasn’t really gonna sell you or anything.”

“Your will be done, M...Riki.” She smiled when he scowled. “I will do whatever you command of me. I do know you would not allow me to be hurt.”

“But you could be hurt, if you stay here. You know that, right?”

“I am for you, Riki. I wish only to help you in whatever way I can.”

Riki sighed. “Yeah. I know.” She was way too innocent to be here on Amoï.
“I’d better...” Riki winced as a familiar pressure started in his head.
“Aww...fuck...not now!”

Yiela glanced at her Prince, concerned when Riki grimaced again and closed his eyes as if in pain. Bean showed no reaction, but continued to drive as ordered, then pulled off the road and shut down the vehicle to wait as Riki had requested.

Chapter 10

Summary for the Chapter:

Guy is trying to find something and Shiao offers to help.

Guy stepped up on the stool and reached into the back of the kitchen cupboard, which was out of even his reach. He swiped his hand as far across the bottom of it as he could, but could not find the recipe disc that he had misplaced.

“Damn it!” He stood on tip-toe to try and see inside the cupboard but it was still too high. He couldn’t imagine why he would have put the disc up there, but he’d looked everywhere else and he hadn’t found it.

“What are you doing?”

Guy yelped and immediately lost his balance. He tried to turn so he could at least break his fall with his hands, but instead he came up against a hard body that seemed to immediately wrap around him as his mouth fell against a set of exquisitely soft lips.

Strong arms pressed their bodies together in a way that he had not experienced since he had been paired with Riki and instinct had his mouth opening wider in invitation. Shiao’s lips moved against Guy’s, either by accident or design and Guy could feel his body react as a surprisingly swift streak of arousal shot through him. It was better than the quick kiss in the bath he had gotten as a reward, better than the one that Shiao had abruptly given him on Avalon when they found each other again. Fuck, it was even better than the kisses he had shared with Riki!

That thought broke the fever that had ensnared him and he felt cold, harsh reality wash over him. Shiao wasn’t Riki, he was an Onyx of Tanagura, an Elite. Shiao was an android like Iason Mink, the bastard machine that had stolen away his lover and best friend.

“W...wait,” he began and managed to get his hands between them to push at Shiao’s impressively impenetrable chest. What was this? What the hell was he doing? How could he have done such a thing?

“Are you okay?” Shiao asked with his usual concern, showing no affect from their kiss.

“I...I...yes, I...” Why was he babbling? “C...can you let go?”

Shiao released his hold and Guy’s feet slid down to touch the floor. “What were you trying to do?”

Guy, who had been in multiple fights since he was a child, and often stood toe to toe to fight with Riki the Dark against any and all who rose against them, suddenly felt like a child next to the Onyx. He, who had ignored the warnings of his gang, thrown fear and caution to the wind and attempted to murder a Blondie felt his all his usual bravado flee so quickly that he couldn’t even look the Onyx in the eye.

“Guy?”

“What?” Guy turned away and moved to the sink, found that his hands were shaking and to cover it up he grabbed a cloth and started to wipe down the already glistening clean counter.

“What were you looking for in the cupboard? Would you like me to get it for you?” Shiao was tall enough to easily look inside the cupboard that Guy had needed to stand on a stool to reach.

“No. It doesn’t matter.”

“It must have been important for you to have been looking...”

“Forget it, okay!” Guy snapped, dropped the cloth in the sink and ran the water over it. He spun around and tried to get his suddenly chaotic emotions under control. “Why are you here?”

“I live here.”

“I know you live here! Why are you here now, at this time? You said you wouldn’t be back for hours.”

“You are upset with me.” Shiao tilted his head. “Why?”

“I’m not upset.” Guy turned away again and stalked to the cold food storage unit. “I just have a headache.” When Shiao’s hand dropped on his neck he slapped it away. “Don’t touch me!” He backed up and spun around, horrified at his behavior. “I’m sorry. I’m not feeling well. I’m gonna go lay down.”

Shiao moved to intercept him. “I will call for a physician...” he began, surprised when Guy sidestepped him.

“I don’t need one. I just need to lay down, okay?”

“Very well.” Shiao watched the mongrel disappear through the archway and tried to think what he had done wrong.

Guy stormed into his room and slammed the door. He dropped face down onto his bed and tried to ignore the feel of his arousal pressed against the mattress. What the fuck was happening? How could he possibly be turned on by Shiao? It was wrong, completely wrong! Shiao was attractive, beautiful even, but he was an android, and it made no sense that Guy would feel any attraction to him.

He wasn’t like Riki, he wasn’t a pet, he would *never* be a pet, so why the hell had he reacted like that? Was he sexually frustrated? The last time he’d had sex was in the bathhouse where he worked, and it hadn’t even been good sex. It had just been for credits because he wasn’t making enough with his regular salary. The special service brought in bigger tips, but it was nothing he actually enjoyed, not like what he’d had with Riki.

A knock at his door made him groan and he covered his head with his pillow as if that would keep Shiao out. Instead the knocking continued until he just couldn’t take it anymore. He growled, jumped up and swung open the door.

“What?” he snapped and immediately regretted it when Shiao actually took a step back. The Onyx held up a bottle of lotion and a heat wand.

“I wished to offer you a massage to help your headache.”

Guy sighed heavily at his own behavior. Shiao was so oblivious most of the time he probably had already forgotten about the kiss in the kitchen. “No, I’m fine.”

“You obviously are not or you would not be behaving so erratically.”

“I’m Human! Humans sometimes behave erratically!”

Shiao frowned. “You are angry with me. What did I do to upset you?”

“Nothing. I just want to be alone, okay!” Seeing that the Elite was not going to just walk away, Guy stomped back to his bed and dropped down on it. “Don’t you have something else to do? Anything else?”

Shiao entered the room slowly, closed the door and walked to the bed. Cautiously he settled beside the mongrel. “Nothing that is more important than you, Guy. Please tell me what I have done to upset you.”

Guy turned sideways and stared at him. “You *really* don’t know?”

“I do not.”

“You kissed me!”

Shiao tilted his head. “No.”

Guy’s eyes widened, was he really going to deny it? “Yes, you fucking did!”

“No, Guy. I did not kiss you, you kissed me.”

Guy opened his mouth to protest then let Shiao’s words register. “W... what?”

“Your lips moved against mine first, I was simply responding as I had assumed you wished me to, or what would have been the purpose of initiating such an act?”

“So...so what? It was like a...a pity kiss or something?”

“I don’t understand that term. What does it mean?”

“That you kissed me because you felt sorry for me!”

“Oh. No, I kissed you in response to your kissing me. There was no feeling involved. Is this why you are upset? Because you kissed me?”

Guy bolted up, shoved his hands in his jeans pockets and glared at the android. No feeling? No fucking feeling at all? He had a hard on that could cut through fucking rock from that kiss and Shiao felt nothing? Fucking Elite. Fucking Onyx. Fucking, fuck fuck!!

Shiao could see that Guy was getting more tense and he leaned forward, concerned. “Guy, are you...?”

“I. Did. Not. Kiss you!”

“I have an infallible memory, Guy, and...”

“I fell, you caught me and our lips met, but I did not fucking kiss you!” Why? Why would he do that? He was a mongrel of Ceres, not a pet of Tanagura. He had no reason to kiss Shiao!

“I find no reason to use profanity.”

“Go fuck yourself!” Guy spun away, stalked to the balcony and threw open the doors to step outside.

Shiao opened his mouth to advise Guy that even for an Elite such an act was physically impossible, but he sensed his fact would not be well received. He stared at the healing wand and lotion in his hands, confused, then finally rose and followed Guy onto the balcony.

“I startled you,” he admitted quietly, not wanting to anger the unpredictable mongrel further, he stayed behind Guy for the same reason. “I apologize for doing so, but when you overbalanced, I caught you on instinct and our lips met,” Shiao waited to see if Guy would lash out at him again, then continued. “When your lips moved against mine, I had assumed that you were initiating a kiss. Did I misunderstand the situation?”

“No! Yes! Look...” Guy turned towards the Onyx, for someone so smart Shiao could be incredibly dense. “That *wasn't* a kiss.”

“Are you quite sure? I have limited personal experience but I have seen others...”

“I wasn’t *trying* to kiss you I was...”

What had he been doing? Guy tried to remember the exact thoughts that had been going through his head at the start of the incident and could find no reason why...Well, okay there could have been a reason. Being held in someone’s arms had aroused him, and had made him think of Riki, so maybe that’s why his lips had moved? It couldn’t have anything to do with the fact that it was Shiao holding him, or that an Elite was kissing him. Could it?

“Guy?”

Guy turned away and gripped the railing beneath his fingers. “It was an accident,” he said. “I never meant to do that.” And he certainly had not considered that Shiao would kiss him back. “I...I was thinking about Riki.”

“I see.”

Guy glanced back as he heard Shiao move back into the bedroom, and felt an unexpected stab guilt. Had he hurt the Onyx with his words? “Why did you kiss me back?” he demanded rushing forward and stopping just outside the balcony doors.

“I will leave the wand and lotion.” Shiao set both on the dresser near the door. “To help your headache.”

Guy's voice caught in his throat as he watched his friend walk out and quietly close the door again. "Shit."

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks to everyone for all the great comments! I get excited to see them as you get excited for each chapter, which inspires me to write more! Besides, suspense is good for you- isn't it? Please enjoy, it's just a short one so I will try and get another chapter up in a couple of days. Sorry to throw Guy in the mix, but he is also part of the story so I have to put him in somewhere. Besides, suspense is good for you- isn't it? Please enjoy and I will try and get another chapter up in a few days.

Chapter 11

Summary for the Chapter:

Iason and Raoul attend the meeting with Jupiter

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks everyone for all the great comments on the last chapter. There will be more with Guy and Shiao later, but for now we continue with our 'regularly scheduled program' :-)

Iason paused outside the meeting chamber and noticed that most of the other Blondies were already seated around the diamond shaped table. He had not realized that Jupiter had called everyone, and he decided to take this opportunity to observe them. Issac was seated on the left side table opposite the entrance way and was staring at Iason with an intensity that the Blondie found surprising.

“Have you decided what to do about him yet?” Raoul asked quietly as he paused beside Iason, who still remained close to the portal that had brought him here.

“No.”

“You must do something.”

“I know.”

Iason had barely been home two full days and he had already needed to deal with unforeseen circumstances regarding Jupiter, Bean, Cal and a host of other things besides. Normally he would accept it as his fate and duty as leader of the Syndicate, but today he was simply irritated by the nonsense of it all. Issac was a difficult problem. The young Blondie was one of the twelve, aside from Raoul, that Iason actually liked. While technically Iason was the youngest of all of them, having been Jupiter’s last and what she considered her best attempt at perfection, Issac was considered by many of

the Blondies to be the ‘kid brother’ to all of them. He was kinder, softer than the others and more prone to instigate a level of fun that few of the Blondies had the capacity or thought for. Everyone loved Iassc, because he was always happy, always sweet and always clinging to his brothers with an enthusiasm that the other Blondies had grown to enjoy.

“You should do it now, before the meeting begins. Get it over with.”

“No. I will wait to see what Jupiter has to say first, then I will make my decision on how to handle things.”

Raoul nodded and both he and Iason moved to their seats.

The lights flickered and all the Blondies rose. A moment later, Jupiter’s hologram appeared in the center of the table that allowed Her unique facial configuration to be viewed from all sides. The Blondies resumed their seats and Jupiter began in a regular simulated voice rather than her usual telepathic method.

“ARS is activated for this meeting.”

A few Elites glanced at each other with curiosity. The Archival Recording System was rarely used during meetings, because it meant that everything that happened in the meeting would be recorded in the main archive, which had such strict security that it could not be erased or tampered with, ever.

“You may now address your concerns to us.”

Jupiter always used the formal and plural when dealing with Her creations, unless it was an individual connection.

Many issues were raised, and several minutes were spent haggling over a new policy for vending licenses. Jupiter addressed the matter quickly and efficiently, then did the same for the three other issues that came afterward.

Seeing that no one was going to speak their minds truthfully, Raoul straightened in his chair to speak up, only to have Aisha Rosen, the head overseer for Tangagura, beat him to it.

“I would ask for a judgement on recent events. We nearly lost our Syndicate leader and our brother due to outside interference. I suggest stricter security for incoming visitors to Amoï. We have become lax these past years and...”

“Security was not the problem,” Diman, the Blondie that had wanted to breed Riki immediately piped up. “Iason was taken off world due to an issue with his pet.” His eyes met Iason’s boldly. “Is that not the case?”

Gideon Lagnat, the Chief of Midas spoke up. “Yet another problem with your pet, Iason?” he smirked. “He is a troublesome thing.”

Iason ignored Gideon’s remarks, as he knew the Chief of Midas really had no problem with Riki, he merely liked to stir up controversy for his own amusement. Instead, he met Diman’s gaze. “How is any of that your concern, Diman?” Had the Blondie still not learned to mind his own business, even after the actions of his own pet had caused him to be banished from Eos, except for the mandatory meetings?

“It is a concern of all of us that your pet continues to create havoc here. Was it not just a year ago, that while chasing after your pet you disappeared for several months?”

“It was not the first time that I was required to be away for a long period of time,” Iason reminded. “And as the leader of the Syndicate I do not need to report my travel arrangements to anyone.”

Another Blondie named Aisha Reese spoke up. “Do we not all work together under Jupiter’s guidance? We are all aware that you hold yourself above us, however you are still a Blondie and your secrets have become too numerous to fairly ignore.”

“Iason has always kept secrets,” Raoul interceded mildly. “As we all do. Our right to individuality and privacy is a gift given to us by Jupiter. If you wish Iason to reveal all that he knows, then are you all also willing to release all the secrets you hold?”

Diman rose slammed his hand on the table. “Our secrets do not affect the security or integrity of Amoï!”

“Do they not?” Iason returned coldly. “Are you so very sure of that, Diman? Shall we discuss some of your secrets then?” Diman immediately sat back down and looked away, unable to risk such a thing. Iason had warned him already of what could happen if he angered the head Blondie of the Syndicate.

“Once again you resort to blackmail, Iason,” Po Laren said in disappointment. “We are all aware that you probably know things we wish you did not, but as ruler of the Syndicate that is to be expected. However, your continued threat to use these things against us to protect your own repulsive behavior is tiresome.”

“None of you had an issue with my behavior before,” Iason counted calmly. “It was not until I brought Riki to Eos that you started to show resistance. Who and what I have for my pet is my business and my behavior is of my own doing and nothing to do with Riki.”

“He is the cause of all of it!”

All the brothers glanced at Issac’s cry, startled by the usually happy and playful Blondie’s very intense reaction. “Everything changed when you brought him here! You changed, Iason, and you cannot even see it!”

“We were created to change, to adapt,” Iason replied his gaze holding Issac’s. “Riki is not to blame for any of this and even if he were, he has allowed me to become a better version of myself, a stronger, more informed Blondie.”

“No! He is pet! A pet cannot have sway over a Blondie! It is inconceivable to even allow it. He has seduced and manipulated you and you do not even realize it. You are Iason Mink, the favored son of Jupiter, and you bow to the whims of a mere pet! A slum mongrel who belongs in the trash with all the rest of them!”

“Do you truly think that *I* could be manipulated by anyone?” Iason’s tone was as cold as ice. “Is your fear of Riki so great that you would dare impugn my integrity as a Blondie, to imply such a thing as you sit there in front of me?” Iason also rose, quietly, a menacing power that caused the

other Blondie's to shift slightly in their seats. "Knowing what you are, what you've done? *You, Issac*, would say that to me?"

Issac slowly lowered his gaze, a look of shock and then misery creased his lovely features.

"The issue is of the mongrel's status as a pet, is this a fair assessment?"

Many of the Blondies nodded and Jupiter's comment.

"We are Blondies, Jupiter," Aisha replied. "You have created us to be superior than all others. The idea that a mongrel pet could hold influence over one of us is both disturbing and distasteful."

Many of the other Blondies again nodded and voiced their agreement.

Jupiter's hologram grew still for several long minutes and the Elites exchanged curious looks as they waited for her response.

"We have found a solution for your complaint. The pet registration for the mongrel known as Riki has been revoked. He is no longer a pet of Tanagura."

"No!" Iason turned to her and in his mind cried. *You said I could keep him, you said he was mine!*

Silence!

Iason's head snapped back from the blow of her voice in his head, and he slowly settled into his chair, barely feeling Raoul's hand of support on his arm.

"Finally, some reason," Diman returned, having recovered from Iason's earlier scolding. "I move that the mongrel be sent back to Ceres, immediately and..."

"Denied."

Diman blinked and looked up at Jupiter. "Is he to be sold to a brothel then?"

Iason's hands fisted under the table and when he lifted his gaze, he saw that all the other Elites were watching him intently. Normally such a suggestion would make no difference to him, it was accepted that unwanted pets could be sold off and he had never given it more than a second thought. He had promised Riki he would never do that, and even the idea of another man touching his beloved, enraged him. Also, in light of what had happened to Cal, he realized that such a fate, while sometimes necessary, was something he found distasteful when one's real feelings for the other were involved.

If he spoke up for Riki it would be admitting to the charges that Diman and Issac had levelled against him, and such admission would instantly deny his worth as a Blondie. Yet, if he did not speak up, he would retain his pride, his position, but he would be sentencing Riki to a fate worse than death and for himself a life without Riki.

"Such a decision is reserved for unmanageable pets, or pets that have deliberately broken the pet rules," Raoul stated, speaking up where he knew Iason could not. "It should not be made on an emotional whim."

"Explain."

Raoul rose. "I am a being of science and logic, however I am also responsible for emotional guidance, where it is needed. This latter duty is due to my reason and insight, which Jupiter has generously gifted me with."

"What are you saying?" Gideon chuckled. "That you are our father confessor?"

"No, I am merely an observer of the emotions and behavior of others. As such, I am well educated on the consensus of feeling regarding the pet named Riki. I have witnessed your physical and emotional dislike for the mongrel's arrogant ways and also your concern that these ways will badly reflect on his owner, Iason Mink."

"Then why do you speak for him?" Issac demanded. "You have also said that you find the mongrel distasteful. Have you not also warned Iason against keeping a mongrel as a pet?"

“I have, yes,” Raoul admitted.

“As was his right to do so,” Iason added, not wishing the others to turn on Raoul as they had him. “Not only as a Blondie and my brother, but also as my friend. Raoul has repeatedly warned me against Riki.” He would not allow Raoul to be pulled into this mess, Raoul had been there for him when all others had not, he had even saved Riki’s life. “As all of you have, at one point or another. What none of you seem to comprehend is that your warnings, your concerns are not my priority. I am a busy man. If any of you doubt that, I suggest you take over my duties as leader for one hour.”

“An hour?” Gideon chuckled. “Why not a day, a week, or a month?”

“You could not handle his workload for that period of time,” Raoul decided. “None of you could, and this is the point. Regardless of what any of us feel for his recent choices, it is Iason’s decisions that have made this Syndicate what it is. It is his decisions that have made us the greatest power in this planet sector.”

“No one is doubting his abilities,” Po Laren assured. “We are all grateful for your leadership, Iason, however you must agree that you have taken a great many risks...”

“Yes,” Iason interrupted. “I took risks in my private life. Those risks have never interfered with the Syndicate’s business.” Iason turned to Jupiter. “That alone should give me leave to keep Riki as my pet. You are our creator, Jupiter. You should not be swayed by anyone’s feelings but your own.”

There was a quiet murmur among the other Elites, as Iason’s bold words filled the room. Jupiter could take such words as an accusation of her logic and power. No one would ever dare speak in such a way, and it was proof, at least to some, that Iason was losing his sense of reason.

Would you truly go this far to protect the pet?

You gave me life, Jupiter, my reason for being, but Riki is my life, he is the reason I wish to live.

We have made all the decisions for this boy and have given him none of the choice. He risked much to save you, my dearest son, not once but twice. He risked his very existence. He has proven his worth and shall be treated accordingly.

“What...?” Iason began but Jupiter was once again addressing everyone.

“There have been questions regarding Iason’s recent disappearance. While your concern for his welfare pleases us, his recent excursion did not affect the Syndicate, or any of your positions. That information will not be disclosed.”

“You favor Iason to much, Jupiter.” Gideon state mildly and without ire.

“We allow favor for all, when it is warranted.”

“And what of the pet?” Aisha demanded. “If he is not to be sold to a brothel, then what is to be his fate? Will you send him back to the slums?”

Iason’s entire body tightened but his face betrayed none of the emotions that threatened to overwhelm him. If Riki went back to the slums would he return to that former life of bargaining his body for trade? Would he reconnect with Guy, restart their relationship? No Guy was no longer on Amoï. And what of him, what would he do without Riki to come home to? Who would he become without Riki’s prideful intervention. Would he become the monster he secretly feared he was? The cruel, unemotional shell that he was before he found the light that was Riki?

I love him, Jupiter. Please. I beg of you. Let him stay.

Iason felt the figment of a caress across his brow, though Jupiter’s hologram made no move towards him.

“It has come to our attention that the pet known a Riki has been of assistance to the vendors and retailers in Tanagura regarding their computers and E-add systems. We have decided that he will continue in this venue. The former pet known as Riki will receive a new

registration number of 5344Y5782 which will be associated with technical services.”

“Outrageous!” two of the Blondies cried.

“He is but a mongrel!” insisted Aisha.

“Actually, Riki was merely raised as a mongrel, his true origin is not from here,” Raoul stated quietly, although he too was shocked by Jupiter’s decision.

Giving a Human, any Human such a coveted registration was almost unheard of. It had always been their policy to keep the organic life-forms powerless and subservient, and thus destroy any possibility of a revolution against Jupiter. While there were a few Humans in Midas who had earned trade registrations, there were none in Tanagura that were registered above trash disposal or cleaning.

He glanced at Iason who seemed to have frozen in place.

“Does this mean that the pet is free and no longer belongs to Iason?” Diman inquired with undisguised interest. If Riki no longer belonged to his brother then he could easily breed the mongrel, or whatever he was, with his own pet.

Raoul noticed the sudden interest in the faces of the other Blondies and wondered if they even realized their own jealousy and greed was part of the reason for their complaint? If Iason could no longer claim ownership of Riki, the others would certainly devise ways to turn the Human to their own desires.

“It was because of the pet!” Issac charged, enraged by the lustful attention he was witnessing in his brothers. “The pet put Iason in danger! Jupiter, you must not do this! Iason was away from us during the time of joining! How can you allow...?”

Issac suddenly gripped his head and fell backwards in the chair as Jupiter’s cold gaze turned to him.

“Don’t do this,” Gideon requested quietly as his brother started to scream.

“Jupiter, please!” Aisha rose and walked over to the writhing Blondie. “He was wrong to speak in such a manner. Please forgive him!”

Issac suddenly slumped and curled into Aisha’s chest with a mild whimper. “Iason,” he whispered. “I did it for you. I did it for you.”

All eyes turned to Iason, but the Blondie did not show even a flicker of reaction.

“You are all behaving irrationally, unable to agree on the pet’s merit or failing. You push your jealousy and greed onto your brother’s position by using his pet to attack his actions, when there is no proof that the pet has caused any change or detriment to the Syndicate’s power or Iason’s position as it’s leader. Your reasons are emotional and invalid.”

“Have we just been called children and told to grow up?” Gideon murmured to the Blondie beside him, amused.

“Essentially,” the other Blondie returned just as quietly.

“We are in agreement with your charge that a pet cannot be permitted to influence his Master, as this degrades his Master’s integrity.”

“Exactly,” Aisha returned. “This is why...”

“Therefore, the former Pet known as Riki the Dark shall henceforth be known as the Prince High Consort to Iason Mink.”

All of the Blondies were stunned silent, until finally Raoul found his voice.

“That is a mouthful,” he stated, slightly appalled. “Must we all address him in this way?”

Jupiter shimmered out with a multitude of colors, then seemed to focus on the Blondie to her right, her favored son.

“How he is addressed will be left to his own choice.”

“Do you dare to place him above an Elite then?” Diman demanded, outraged. “Are we to be made fools of by a Mongrel?”

“A quick temper will make a fool of you soon enough,” Gideon quipped lightly and then glanced around the table. “Are all of you so threatened by a mere mongrel?”

“A mongrel that holds favor with Jupiter!” Aisha stated, angrily. “Can you deny that this beast has managed to infiltrate the hearts and minds of all who reside in Tanagura, and now he has managed to fool Jupiter into thinking he is a stable entity to have among us?”

“None but an Elite can be above or equal to one.”

“I admit I am puzzled, Jupiter,” Gideon confided. “We are forbidden from having such relations with our pets, which is the purpose of the pet parties, so that we may enjoy the act without participating. Are you now issuing a new directive that this law is obsolete for all of us or only for Iason?”

“That is ludicrous!” Po Laren stated. “We should not ever mate with a Human. The very idea is disgusting!”

“I agree,” Diman said. “Such acts will eventually degrade us to their level. Jupiter, did you not initially forbid it for this reason?”

Aisha spoke next. “It is further proof that Iason is not the Blondie he was, that he has broken our most firm directives for the sake of his pet. It is against everything that we stand for.”

“I worry that allowing a mongrel,” Diman continued and cast Raoul a sidelong glance. “Or whatever race he may be, such a position will lead to revolution. The greed of a Human is difficult to contain, putting one in such a position of power may lead to future chaos. Is this not why the slums were created, to keep the Humans in their place?”

“Exactly!” Po Laren agreed. “We cannot allow even one of them to rise too far above their station!”

“I don’t know if changing his registration will give Riki additional power over anyone or anything,” Raoul countered logically when Jupiter refrained from commenting on the debate. “It is merely a change in registration and title. Making the pet a technician seems logical, if he is as good with systems as I have heard.”

“A technician is merely a serviceman,” Gideon reminded the others. “It does not put him above anyone of status, but nor does it leave him at the bottom either. Furniture are also mongrels and yet we trust them to run our households, including making purchases and decisions for the betterment of our convenience. We all have Humans working for us outside of Tanagura, in our factories, casinos, shops and the like as managers and assistants. Their designations do not put them above an Elite and they still must answer to one of us on any big decisions.”

“Then why must does he warrant such a title?” Aisha demanded facing Jupiter. “Such a thing will only advertise the unnatural relationship Iason has with him, it will bring shame to all Blondies. I cannot agree to this farce.”

“It is not unnatural!” Iason charged, finally finding his voice.

Listening to them bicker over what was right or wrong, moral or immoral regarding his personal life was sickening. He was still shocked over Jupiter’s decree, and yet he was immeasurably pleased as well. He could not sit idly and allow his brothers to change Jupiter’s mind.

“Your personal life is your own,” Diman stated. “In that we agree, however the positions other Humans have achieved in our society were given after many years of trust, hard work and proven loyalty. This pet has been a Cancer in Eos. He is ignorant and dismissive of our laws and has refused to acknowledge his place. He riles up the other pets to misbehave, incites anger and hostility in all who meet him. He has done nothing to warrant such a designation.”

“And yet you wished to mate such a being to one of your own pets, Diman,” Iason countered, darkly.

“An error in judgement on my part. After I saw the way he behaved I was completely cured of the idea.”

Liar, Iason thought. You were cured by your punishment for allowing your own pet too much freedom.

“He has caused you hardship, Iason.” Issac said quietly. “You have been taken from us twice now, because of that pet. Once when we believed you had actually died and....”

“I would have died,” Iason admitted. “I have not disclosed what happened at Dana Bahn because I believed you would perceive me as weak, however I cannot allow this misunderstanding of Riki to continue.”

“Iason...” Raoul warned and put a hand to his friend’s arm.

“I was injured in an explosion at Dana Bahn, badly enough that I could not walk out. Riki was there and a friend of his, who was also injured. I told Riki to take his friend and go, because he could not help me and I was forced to watch my pet walk away as the flames gathered around me.”

“Proof that he is useless!” Issac cried.

“No. As I sat there, contemplating death, I was very surprised when I witnessed Riki walking back through the flames. He returned to me.”

Several of the Blondies exchanged a baffled glance.

“I don’t understand,” Gideon admitted. “Is that not a reasonable action for a pet, to be with their Master?”

“Riki has never acknowledged me as his Master. He fought against his training and his position for years and continually tried to escape from me. He sought only his freedom, and yet, on the day he could have earned that freedom and been rid of me forever, he walked through fire to die beside me. He returned so that I would not be alone and because he felt he owed it

to me for saving his friend. I would not be standing here if it were not for him.”

“You would not have been in that position if not for him to begin with,” Issac charged. “Was it not this mongrel friend who lured you there with the intent to kill you because you had stolen Riki from him?”

So, Iason thought, Issac knew more than the others. “That is true, but even that should show you the kind of man that Riki is. That his friends would go up against a Blondie to free him, risk their own lives just so that Riki would be free. Does it not speak for his strength and integrity? Riki is no ordinary mongrel, he is special and that is why I chose him as my pet. Do you know anyone, Human or Elite, that would make the sacrifices that both Guy and Riki made that day?”

The Blondies had to admit they did not. Most were reasonably sure that their pets would not follow them into danger or risk their own lives, as many of them were too pampered and shallow.

“And that was not the last time that Riki has sacrificed for me. He did it a few days ago, as well. What none of you seem to realize is that what has always attracted me to Riki is that he has pride. Despite being a mongrel and the lowest of the low, he has endured. He survives without stepping on others. He prefers to stand on his own and owe no one, but when he does he always pays his debts. Riki is a slum mongrel but he refuses to accept that anyone is better than he is, yet he has still maintained his pride and dignity even after I took everything away from him and made him a pet. He treats people as they treat him, not based on status or titles or race, and there is not a trace of false loyalty in him. He doesn’t crave power or status or even material goods. He just wants to be free to live a reasonably comfortable life doing as he wants to do.”

“And what is it he wants to do?” Gideon asked, oddly touched by Iason’s speech. “To stay with a Blondie that kept him as a pet for so many years? If you think so highly of him, why do you not simply set him free?”

“We have offered Riki the choice of freedom and he declined our favor.”

Iason stared at Jupiter's image and tried, unsuccessfully to hide his shock. "You offered to free him?"

Granted, Iason had made the same offer and Riki had declined his freedom previously, because he knew that Iason would eventually find him again. But Riki had to know that if Jupiter freed him Iason could not give chase. He would be bound by Jupiter's decision. So, what did that mean?"

"Riki has chosen to be the consort of an Elite and will be treated with the accorded respect allowed for his position. This is our decision. None shall deny it."

Jupiter's image shimmered and evaporated.

It was nearly impossible to surprise a Blondie, yet Jupiter's final words had almost all of them rearing back in stunned silence, all but Iason, who continued to stare at his gloved hands upon the table.

"No," Issac whispered. "This can't be." He rose up angrily and started towards Iason. "How could you do this? How could you accept that...that thing over your brothers?"

Raoul stepped in, preventing Issac from reaching his friend. "This will not end well," he warned quietly. "Iason is well aware of your part in Riki's kidnapping, and you will only make your punishment worse if you attack him over this now."

Issac's eyes widened. "I did it for him, because of him. Why can he not see the influence that mongrel has over him? Does he not understand..." Issac's eyes grew wider as a gloved hand grabbed his tunic and he was suddenly slammed into a wall.

"Your jealousy will not be justification for your actions!" Iason growled as he pinned Issac to the wall while the other Blondies rose, intrigued. "You have betrayed me, you have betrayed us all!"

"No! You betrayed us! You have forgotten those who truly care about you to spend your time with that dissident. You speak of loyalty and sacrifice yet

you hold no such feelings for your own brothers!” Issac pushed back and Iason allowed the Blondie to break his grip. “We are brothers and you have forgotten us. You have put your pet above all of us, above me!” He caught Iason’s arm, pleadingly. “We used to talk you and I, and share confidences. You always had time for me, and since that pet came he is all you can think about. You are Iason Mink! You cannot be cowed by one mongrel! You are needed by everyone!”

“I had intended to forgive you for what you did, because I do understand your reasons.”

Iason firmly pulled Issac’s fingers from his arm. For some reason, when Raoul had told him about Issac’s betrayal he could not stop thinking about what Riki had said regarding Guy’s actions and Dana Bahn; and how they had pushed him to do it. He supposed he had been neglecting Issac and many others in favor of spending time with Riki, but how could they blame him when they failed to keep their distaste of his pet to themselves, and continued to preach to him about morality?

“I did it for you,” Issac repeated quietly. “I was helping you, Iason, to bring you back to us.”

“I know.” Iason dropped his hand on Issac’s shoulder and squeezed. “I always thought of you as my younger sibling, Issac, and I had taken that into account when I heard of your actions, but you not only endangered myself and Riki, you endangered all of Tanagura by allowing those people to bypass security. They seemed very knowledgeable about myself and our kind, which means they managed to access at least some of our confidential files.”

“What?” Aisha demanded moving forward. “Issac, what have you done?”

“I am still the leader of the Syndicate and such a breach cannot be forgiven.” Iason touched a gloved hand to the Blondie’s pale face. “Issac, if only you had only come to me, spoken to me of your feelings I would have listened.”

Again, he was reminded of Guy's desperation to have Riki freed, but now, as he had then, he would not accept responsibility for another's choices. Iassc had made his decision without seeking out an alternative, without speaking to Iason about his concerns.

"I would have made the time for you," he stated quietly, determined to believe that it was true.

Iassc held Iason's gaze, tenderly. "We can do so now. We can make things as they were..."

"No. It has gone too far for that." Iason dropped his hand, stepped back. "I invoke the rite of Phashing to be completed within the next seventy-two hours."

"No," Issac whispered. "Please, Iason. I did it for you!"

"You seem to believe that I have changed from the Blondie I once was, perhaps this will prove beyond a doubt that I am the same. I cannot allow any attacks against the security of the Tanagura Syndicate, regardless of person or circumstance." He looked back at Raoul, who he knew would have to be the one to do the mind wipe, and he was sorry for it. "I will leave the length of specification up to you, as well as his rehabilitation. I will have nothing more to do with him after this day and I would ask that no one speaks his name in my presence ever again."

Iason strode out. They do not understand, could not understand that the choices he made were always difficult ones. He did not wish to wipe Issac's memory and reset him back to a new Blondie, but he could see no other recourse. If he showed mercy it would prove to the others that he had changed, that he was weak and they would continue to doubt his decisions and rights as a Blondie. If he allowed Issac to remain as he was, with his memory intact, eventually the young Blondie would either turn the other brothers against him, or he would do something more foolish as Guy had done for Riki. Finally, he understood why Riki had been so distraught over Guy; it was a difficult thing to accept betrayal of a friend and brother, yet still deliver punishment.

“Iason!”

He turned and watched Diman stride towards him.

“Would you really go this far for your mongrel pet?”

“My decision is for the security of Tanagura.” Iason’s eyes sparked red and had the other Blondie stepping back. “The meeting is over, Diman. Shouldn’t you be taking a transport out of the city?”

“This isn’t over, Iason.” Diman turned on his heel and stalked away.

Iason rubbed the ache between his forehead, no, it was all just beginning. He had a flicker of doubt over his decision against Issac, a moment of remorse for the Blondie that had always been funny and kind to him, but he shrugged it off. He was Iason Mink, the hardest decisions were always left to him because he had the strength to make them. That did not mean he did not occasionally regret it.

He stepped through a portal to take him back to the condo; he needed to see Riki now.

Notes for the Chapter:

Kudos to fanfic3112 for partially suggesting Riki's new title!

Chapter 12

Summary for the Chapter:

Riki deals with Cal

Notes for the Chapter:

WOW! So many comments! I am so happy you all enjoyed it, as I agonized over whether or not to change Riki's title so many times...That deserves a treat, so here is the next chapter, earlier than I had intended, for you all to enjoy.

Riki and Bean returned to the whore-house in Ranaya Uugo just after sunrise, leaving Yiela in the car this time, and sure enough the guard named Ren that Jana had described greeted them.

“You have a whore named Jana here?”

“He’s just finishing up, you’ll have to wait.”

“Okay.” Riki leaned against the counter. This guy was obviously better educated than the night guard he had spoken to previously. He had removed his tunic and cape and was now in a tight tank-top and slacks. He’d also exchanged the large, Blondie sunglasses for his usual mongrel shades. “Say, I was wondering if you could help me find out about some new merchandise that came in recently?”

“We can’t discuss products or clients.”

“Oh, that’s a shame.” Riki stretched, causing his shirt to rise and scrapped his nails against his suddenly bare midriff. “Because I heard sometimes you guys did favors and I...like to watch.” He slid his hand under his shirt and caressed himself. “But if it’s against the rules.”

Ren’s eyes followed the path of Riki’s hand. “You heard that, huh?”

“Yeah. I heard you guys don’t get to sample the merchandise either, unless someone else pays for it.” Riki’s hand slowly moved down to his crotch. “You’re a big guy, just thinking about you nailing some whore makes me really...hot.”

The guard stood so fast that his chair fell backwards onto the floor, but then he recovered and glanced around. “How much are you...” He looked around. “Willing to pay?”

Riki shrugged seductively. “Depends on how good the information is.”

Ren swallowed several times, convulsively as his lust wared with his duty. “You requested Jana.”

“Yeah.”

“Is...that who you’d pay for?”

“I hear he’s good.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Ren wet his lips. “He’s one of our best sellers.”

“So...” Riki backed up, dropped down on one of the client benches and let both legs slide wide to give the guy a good view of his lower extremities, fairly obvious even in the tailored slacks. “Can you help me out?”

“I can take you inside the room,” Ren glanced around. “My partner will be back any minute from rounds.

“Inside is good, but what about my information?”

The guard glanced at his screens and one showed a green light over Jana’s cell, he nodded. “They must be done. What were you asking about?”

“A really cute blonde boy was brought in a few days ago, real sweet lookin’. I need the names of those who used him?”

“Why?”

Riki shrugged. "I heard he got taken out of here by a Blondie but before he was..." Riki lazily caressed his inner thigh. "They were real thorough with him. I really like guys who are...thorough."

Ren wet his lips and typed some commands into his console, then slid a small data disc into it. "You'll have to pay first."

Riki didn't like the sound of that, he still didn't have any information. "How do I know you can...help me with what I need?"

"I got your info right here, but you'd have to pay for at least the Level three package." When Riki stared him down, the guard shrugged. "I can't enter that room unless Level three or higher is asked for."

"Pay him," Riki told Bean, who stepped forward and offered his credit stick.

The second guard arrived just as Ren stepped out of the booth and they walked through the secured door leading to the cells. They stopped by Jana's room and the guard unlocked the door, which automatically locked again once they were inside.

Jana was still lying on the bed and was slow to move, proving that his last client had been rough with him. When he turned, and saw Riki, tears filled his eyes. "Y...you came back."

Riki ignored him and held out his hand to the guard. "He's all yours, but I get my information first."

"Sure." Ren handed Riki the data disc. "But you'll need the access code to open in, which I'll give you once we've covered your end of the deal."

Riki probably could have just hacked the code, but a deal was a deal and Jana said he would be fine with it. He moved over to the one chair in the corner and sat down. "Have at it."

Ren's eyes gleamed as he turned to Jana whose eyes widened slightly in fear, for the man was abnormally large, but then he crawled onto the bed

resigned.

Bean stood passively beside Riki, who tried to ignore the sounds of sex as the giant took Jana hard and fast, once, then a second time. When Ren seemed eager to go for a third, Riki rose and grabbed his shoulder. "I think that settles our bill," he warned. "The code."

Ren tried to toss Riki back, eager now that he had such sweet meat under him to continue. "I'm not done!"

It's not enough. Jason's words entered Riki's mind and he recalled all the times the Blondie had exhausted him with his zealousness. Jana was barely moving at this point, and Riki understood that feeling too. He grabbed a whip off the wall and snapped it around Ren's neck, causing the man to choke and rear backwards.

"I say you're done." With a hard pull, he wrenched the guard away from Jana and dropped him to the floor. Pulling the whip tighter around Ren's neck Riki dropped a foot to the man's exposed crotch and hovered over him. "The code. Now!"

"F...five, six...four...three, nine."

"Our deal is done, now, you understand?" Riki continued. "You got what you wanted, and so did I." His foot pressed harder and Ren cried out. "You do not want to peruse this further. I can make you disappear with a single phone call and not one person will miss you. Are we clear?"

Ren managed to nod through the pain and lack of oxygen.

Riki stepped away and let the whip drop from his hands. "Good." He glanced back at Jana who managed to sit up, though his body was physically shaking. "I guess I owe you too." He stepped over the guard, walked to the bed and grabbed Jana by the hair, he bent down as if he was going to kiss him, and instead stuck a finger in the former pet's ass.

Jana's eyes widened in shock.

“Now, we’re even.”

Riki straightened, relieved the giant believed his bluff, and moved to the door. He glanced at Ren who was still working on getting to his knees. “Well, come on, unless you want to be found in here on your own.”

Ren managed to stand and shakily pulled on his clothes, before moving to the door and swiping it open with his pass. He glanced at Riki who’s dark glasses hid his gaze and yet, the guard felt himself shrink against it, then all three stepped out and let the door shut behind them.

With a trembling hand, Jana reached back and pulled out the administrator’s pass card that Riki had shoved in him. It would open every door in the facility without sending up an alarm, it would even give him access to a vehicle. Tears streamed down his face.

“Thank you, Riki.”

Once they were back in the vehicle Riki opened the back door of the car and spoke to Bean. “Get in.”

Bean paused. Wouldn’t The Pet need him to drive them back to Eos? “Why?”

Instead of answering, Riki shoved him in and closed the door. Riki then got into the driver’s side and bent down over the front instrument panel as Bean leaned forward over the seats.

“What are you doing?” His eyes widened as the engine started and Riki entered a destination code into the auto-drive function. “How did you access...?”

Riki smirked at him in the mirror. “I’ve been hot wiring cars since before you were born, kid.”

“Then...then why did you need me to come?”

“Slide over here, Yiela,” Riki instructed as he stepped back out of the car. “You don’t have to touch anything, it will drive on its own.”

Yiela complied and moved from the passenger’s seat to the driver’s seat as Riki opened the back door and slid in beside Bean.

“Drive,” Riki instructed and the vehicle began to move. Riki leaned forward and activated the privacy screen between them and the front.

“Where are we going?” Bean demanded, since Yiela was in the front he did not have to worry about her hitting him again.

“Drink?” Riki asked as he programmed the in-car bar and a moment later a slot in front of him produced a glass of amber liquid.

“No.”

“Okay.” Riki pulled out the data console that Iason had given him and popped the disc in to read the three profiles. “Well, these assholes look mean, don’t they?” He showed the screen to Bean who looked away, uneasily.

“It isn’t my fault, what they did,” he muttered. “They had a right to do it, they paid for Cal and...”

“Cal never should have been there to be paid for. *You* put him there.”

Bean had foolishly hoped that he had been forgiven, since Riki had requested his help with so many things. He tried to maintain his calm and reached into his training; a Furniture was prepared to handle any situation.

“What are you going to do now?”

“It’s not what I’m gonna do, it’s what you’re gonna do.”

Bean’s eyes widened. “I’m not going to do anything! Look, we had better return home. Master Iason will surely be worried and...”

Riki tossed the small console at him. “Call them.”

“W...what?”

“Call these men and tell them you have a special deal for them.”

“I can’t lie to...”

“You’ve lied before.”

“What are you going to do to them?”

“Call them and tell them you’ve got merchandise that you need to sell, that’s too hot for the brothels. Tell them to meet you...” Riki inputted coordinates into the onboard console in front of them. “Here in two hours if they’re interested.”

Bean’s eyebrows rose. “Why here?”

“Just do it!” Riki snapped.

“If I do this, then can we go home?”

Riki sipped his drink and remained silent.

Bean made the calls over his wrist unit, but only managed to get through to two of the men, so he left a message for the third. He tried not be concerned that they all saw his face and would be able to identify him. How would he explain all of this to Master Iason? What if the men filed a complaint and managed to confirm he worked for a Blondie? Was The Pet doing all of this to frighten him, or was Riki going to allow those men to do horrible things to him? He found that he did not have the courage to ask.

“I don’t understand,” Bean said after he disconnected the last call. “I have apologized. I have done everything you asked! I helped you find these men and I will never say a word to Master Iason about it, I promise!”

“It’s not enough.” Riki suddenly recalled how often Iason had said those words to him; only now did he come to understand them. True satisfaction was sometimes difficult to achieve, as was true justice.

“It’s not my fault! That woman even s...said that it was *you* who did this to me! I didn’t know what I was doing! It isn’t my fault! You made me fall in love with you!”

“I thought about that,” Riki admitted and it had allowed him a little sympathy and maybe even some guilt towards Bean, but then he remembered what the Queen had said about his unique gift. “The thing is, I *can’t* make anyone fall in love with me.”

“B...but that was it, that was how I felt...I...”

“No. You *hated* me, Bean. You treated me like everyone else did, worse sometimes, but with the same disgust, the same prejudice. You only ever referred to me as The Pet and you pointed out your opinion of me at every opportunity.”

Bean flushed. “No!” He looked out the window on his side, unable to face the cold unbreakable darkness of Riki’s eyes, and only then realized that the vehicle was running in stealth mode and the windows were covered with armored shields, preventing anyone from seeing in or out. For some reason, this made him more afraid. “I have never treated you unfairly! I obeyed all the rules of etiquette when dealing with a pet and...”

“Exactly,” Riki replied. “You never deviated from the protocol of how to handle a pet. You never showed favoritism, you never tried to win my respect...”

“A Furniture cannot do any of those things with a pet!”

“You never looked at me with anything other than hatred or annoyance,” Riki continued as if there had been no interruption. “How can you expect anyone to believe that some kind of love spell was cast over you?”

“I... thought about you! I was attracted to you!” Bean cried, desperate to make Riki see reason, to excuse his behavior. “As Furniture, I shouldn’t have been, but I was and...and that had to be because of your power!”

“You told Iason you did what you did to Cal because you thought he was being inappropriate toward me.”

“Yes, I...I did say that, and that was true! Cal was overly friendly with you and far more attached than any Furniture should be with a pet...”

“But you weren’t anything like that and yet you say you were in love with me.”

B...because I was jealous and I was afraid of what Master Iason would say because he is so very possessive of you and...and I was unable to see reason because of those feelings! It was like I was in a trance or...”

Riki moved and suddenly trapped Bean against the seat with his arms. “Then kiss me.”

“W...what?”

“Now’s your chance. Kiss me. I won’t tell Iason, go ahead. Show me how much you want me.”

“P...P...Pardon me?” What was this? Why was Riki doing this? What was happening? “Why are you doing this?”

“Are you afraid?”

“Of course, I’m afraid! You won’t tell me where we’re going or what you plan to do to me!”

“What does it matter if you can be with the one you love? If you have the chance to do the things you say you thought about? What did you think about, Bean? Did you think about me kissing you? Or maybe you wanted to suck me off so I could fuck you hard and fast?”

“I...I...”

“Whatever this power I have is, it has nothing to do with love.” He had also spoken with Yielia more about the full concept of what his power could do and she confirmed his suspicions. “It can cause people to like me, to want

to be around me, to want my respect and attention. It might even be used to persuade someone to trust me, but it has *nothing* to do with love.” Riki’s obsidian eyes bore into Bean’s frightened ones. “I grew up in Ceres, I know when someone wants me, but I don’t see lust, or passion in your eyes. I don’t even see like, Bean. All I see is fear.”

Bean started to shake.

“You weren’t afraid of your feelings for me, if you were you would have asked to be dismissed, or you would have acted more cordially, so that Iason wouldn’t suspect anything. You knew that Iason would kill you if he thought you felt that way about me.”

“I...I did know. I was afraid and...”

“Cal was the perfect barrier between you and me. Iason would never suspect you felt that way about me as long as Cal was there, because I was close to Cal and if Iason was going to suspect anyone it would be him. Don’t you see? You ruined the best chance you had to keep your secret by getting rid of Cal.”

Bean turned pale as he realized that Riki was much smarter than he had given him credit for and he scrambled to recover. “I didn’t see it that way. Perhaps you’re right but my thinking was muddled. It was muddled because of what you were doing to me. I clearly wasn’t thinking straight and...”

“Furniture hears and sees everything, Bean, I learned that the hard way. You got rid of Cal, while we were away because you saw the opportunity to do so.”

“No...”

“You got rid of him because you were afraid he would take over your position and you’d be dismissed.”

“That wasn’t...”

“You hated Cal as much as you hated me, probably more. You couldn’t give up the status of being Iason Mink’s Furniture, and when Cal came back you saw that you weren’t needed, that you were impractical and insignificant next to him. You saw that you were becoming obsolete.”

“No! I am *better* than him!” Bean snarled and then realized his mistake and quickly back pedaled. “I...I mean...My qualifications are newer, more advanced than Cal’s. I am the highest rated Furniture in Eos so...so I had no reason to be threatened by him.”

Riki wished he could be surprised at the confidence, greed and malice that was riddled through someone so young, but he had not been much better as a kid growing up in Ceres. He had never turned on one of his own, unless it was justified, and never hurt another unless it was in self-defense, but he knew other kids that had. Other kids who would steal, betray and even kill their closest ally if it meant getting what they wanted.

He thought, for a very brief moment, of Kirie. Yeah, youth had nothing to do with wickedness, but Bean’s actions had not been justified, or in reaction to a personal assault, and that was what pissed Riki off the most. Cal had done nothing to deserve such punishment, he had treated Bean with respect and kindness after he returned, which couldn’t have been easy.

“You overheard me talking to Iason about my power when we got back,” Riki continued. “And you decided to use it to your advantage. You realized that you had tossed away the perfect opportunity to get rid of Cal by accusing him of a relationship that Iason wouldn’t tolerate, so you had to find another reason. You hadn’t expected Iason to fly into a rage the way he had, you thought he would excuse your behavior because it would have been my fault.”

“No,” Bean whispered and literally tried to shrink away from Riki as the truth was fully revealed.

“It’s impossible for Furniture to feel sexual desire, Bean,” Riki reminded. “You know that. I know that. I learned the hard way, when I had one of you sucking me off for hours at a time and that Furniture never, ever showed even a remotely physical response.”

“It...it was you...”

“You sold Cal to rapists for your own ambition.”

Unable to take it anymore, Bean shoved Riki away from him, tried to open the door but found it locked. “So what if I did!” he spat “I am Master Mink’s Furniture! He picked me. *Me!* All I have ever worked for are Jades, the lowest possible Elites next to the Onyx and they are appropriately grouped. They are lazy and arrogant and narcissistic! They have no ambition, no power, but Iason Mink is a Blondie, he is *the* Blondie and he picked me!”

Riki settled back in his seat. “You were only ever a temporary fixture, Bean. Cal was always going to come back, but then, Iason even made accommodation when he did so you wouldn’t have to leave. You betrayed his kindness with brutality and deception.”

Bean blinked, surprised by the mongrel’s eloquence and struggled to find a foothold in the conversation, something, anything that would save him from his certain doom. “You’ll be punished,” he warned. “Whatever you do to me Master Mink will discover and you will be punished! He’ll find out about what you did, about the administrator at Ranaya Ugo and breaking the rules. He’ll find out you contacted those men and you’ll be responsible for anything that happens to them. You’ll die for that! They’ll terminate you!”

“Actually, they won’t. No one would think I was a pet dressed like this, and they’d never be able to describe Yielia, she’s just a whore. You are the Furniture that sold Cal, so they’ll recognize your face and name. It’s your code that requisitioned this car, voice that requested the coordinates and your credit that the payment at Ranaya Ugo was made with.” Riki leaned towards him again and expertly slipped off the boy’s wrist unit. “And if they find this, they’ll know that you contacted the men that hurt Cal.”

Bean’s skin turned the colour of ash. “I...But I...I didn’t. It was you! You told me to...to do it!”

“Since when does Furniture listen to a pet?”

Realizing how very badly things had gone for him, Bean tried to release the door locks, using his hands, his fists and his voice, demanding to be released.

Riki watched the frantic boy with a dark expression, then flipped out a vibro-blade. "Iason told me to punish you, so that's what I'm gonna do."

"No! NO!" Bean screamed, and again tried to get out of the car, but Riki secured him in a head lock within seconds. "Don't kill me! Please, don't kill me!"

"I'm not gonna kill you, Bean." Riki whispered close in his ear. "But this will hurt." He swiped the blade across Bean's forehead to form a small symbol; A dot within a triangle with a tail.

Bean cried out in pain, but it was over almost immediately and he was released. He cowered against the door, holding his forehead and trying to ignore the smell of his own burned flesh. There was no blood, a vibro-blade cauterized as it cut. "W...what are you g...going to do?"

"You may think mongrels are shit, even more than pets, but we have a code. When we make a deal, we never break it. Those who break deals are considered Screns and Screns are where I come from, they're the very bottom of the food chain." Riki switched off the knife, pocketed it and poked Bean's burned forehead. "This is your new home, Sren."

The car slowed to a stop and Riki reached across to open Bean's door, which was now unlocked. "Get out."

Bean glanced out at the park where several rough looking mongrels were now glancing cautiously at the fancy vehicle. They were in Ceres! Riki meant to leave him here?

"You can't do this!" Bean croaked, even as Riki shoved him from behind. He fell sideways through the door onto the hard, cold ground. "No! No! I don't belong here!"

Riki used his foot to shove Bean away as he tried to crawl back into the vehicle. “No one fucking belongs here!” he snarled.

“I...I’m a child! I’m just a child!”

Bean’s young crying face almost, *almost* gave Riki pause, but then he thought of Cal, sweet seemingly innocent Cal. He knew that Cal was also not a child, but that boy would never hurt anyone. He thought of Cal’s smile, his laugh when Riki was teaching him to swim. He thought of how Cal cried in relief when Riki finally woke up after the incident in Dana Bahn and how he always made Riki chocolate cake in an effort to keep the peace.

“No! You *hurt* a child! A good kid, just to keep your new status in Eos. You betrayed Iason’s trust, you broke the deal you made when you became Furniture.”

“You said you wouldn’t hurt me!”

“I said I wouldn’t kill you.” Leaving Bean here, marked as a deal-breaker would be far, far worse than death.

“Please!” Bean cried as Riki closed the door, but released the shade on the window so he could lower it just enough so that Bean could hear him, but the approaching mongrels would not see his face. “You can’t do this to me! I’m Furniture! I have a Master! You can’t do this!”

“I can’t do anything to you in your world, but this is my world.”

Riki had realized that any punishment he used in Tanagura for Bean may reflect badly on Iason, even though he had been given permission to deal with it. Blondies loved their deceit and debauchery but only in private. They didn’t approve of public scandals and he suspected that Bean was counting on that as a reason to remain with Iason; or at least not be terminated.

“Here, I’m not a pet, but a leader. I’m the top of the food chain, a fucking legend, and one thing you never do to Riki the Dark is fuck with his gang.

That's a rule. Cal isn't a member of Bison, but he's still one of mine and you hurt what's *mine*."

"R...Riki, please!" Bean clawed at the window. "I...You can't do this! Why are you doing this?"

"Because you broke a deal, Bean. You broke your own rules and you hurt someone I care about. So now you get to pay with the only currency in Ceres. Here, when you break the rules, everyone gets to collect."

Bean stood up and pounded on the car window. "This isn't you!" he cried. "You're a kind person, you...you're a good person, you...you're a...a Prince!"

"Nah, I'm just a street rat in fancy clothes."

Riki reengaged the window shield as he lowered the privacy shield between the back and front. He poured two drinks and passed them through to Yielā who had remained in the driver's seat.

"Move over," he requested and once she had done so he squeezed his slim body over the seats and dropped into her previous spot.

"Is this your will, Maku?" she asked as he switched the front console to a rear view of the car and watched as four Mongrels descended on the young, screaming Furniture.

Riki didn't have the energy to correct her and he refused to allow even a hint of sympathy or remorse for what was about to happen. "Yeah," he stated as he programmed their new destination and instructed it to drive. "This is on me."

"Does leaving the boy there fulfill your need for justice?"

"He's not a boy." None of them were, Riki thought sadly. No one remained a child on Amoī for very long at all. "He made his choices as an adult, so he has to face them as one."

"Your laws are very harsh."

“Life is harsh.” He picked up one of the drinks, tossed it back, and then handed the other one to her. “Anyone that tells you different is selling you something.”

Yiela accepted the glass, and did as he had done. White hot liquid slid down her throat and almost made her gasp, but she maintained her composure. “Is it done then? Your quest for justice?”

“No.” Riki was suddenly very, very tired, and for some reason just wanted to go home, but he had to finish this. “One more stop.”

“Will the other boy, the one who was victimized, appreciate what you do for him?”

“He won’t know.” He glanced at her. “You can’t tell him, ever. You can’t tell anyone about what we did tonight. Understand?”

“I am for you,” she repeated calmly, then paused. “May I touch you?”

He glanced at her suspiciously. “Why?”

“Just for a moment?”

“Uh...okay.” Riki tensed automatically, but she only put her hand on his arm, squeezed gently.

“You are a good man, Riki.” She used his name deliberately and with a gentle voice.

“I’m not...I’m not good, I’m...”

“You are a champion for your people, even when the actions you must take are difficult on you and against your true heart.”

“Do you not understand what I’ve done? Do you know what those people will do to Bean, now that I’ve marked him and left him there? Do you get how much he will suffer?”

“As your friend suffered at the hands of others? As your friend was a victim of injustice, so now will his predator be a victim in much the same way?”

Riki stared at her, suddenly appalled that she did seem to understand, and more so that she knew he was responsible for it. He thought of how good and kind the people of Avalon seemed to be, when they weren't holding him captive anyway. Granted his time there had not been ideal, but he could see the great differences in their culture. People there were happy, satisfied with their lives. Everything was roses on Avalon, wasn't it? How must he look to her then, as a man who was kept as a pet and who passed judgement others so coldly.

He wanted to lower his eyes but his pride wouldn't allow it. “You must think I'm a monster.”

She shook her head. “No. I think of you as a Prince, and one day, a King.”

“How can you say that after the things you've seen here? After what you've seen me do and say and...be here?”

“You are who you must be,” she returned softly. “I am proud of you, Riki, as your parents would be proud. You have had a harsh and challenging life, yet you have maintained your pride and integrity. Rather than shun those around you and levy mistrust because of your circumstance, you allow yourself to care about people and you are loyal to them. You understand the meaning of justice and you are not frightened of taking the responsibility to ensure it is done. You do not wish to hear it, but all of that, all that you, are is what will make you a great King.”

Riki blinked rapidly, appalled at the sudden moisture in his eyes and finally looked ahead. He snatched his arm away from her hand. “I'm not a King. I'm a pet. I'm not going back to Avalon so you can quit your bullshit right now.”

“I am unsure how an animal's excrement pertains to our conversation, however, I will hold my tongue on the matter if it is your wish, as I will on all matters between us. I am for you, Maku, and only by your leave may I speak or take action.”

“I don’t want a slave!”

“No. I asked for this, I was not persuaded to be here. I am for you as I wish to be, as the Gods wished me to be.”

“There is no God. Jupiter is the only God here.”

Yiela faced the front serenely. “God is not a machine.”

“How do you know?” he challenged.

She smiled. “Perhaps one day we will both learn that answer.”

“Yeah,” Riki stared at the viewer, pushed the idea that Bean was dragged off to be beaten, raped, or possibly both, out of his head. He doubted that the Furniture would survive the night, and he really didn’t care, but Bean was pretty smart and manipulative so maybe he’d manage it anyways.

Chapter 13

Summary for the Chapter:

Raoul reveals his plans for experimenting to Katze
&
Guy and Shiao have a late night discussion

Notes for the Chapter:

WARNING- EXPLICIT SCENE-

wow, lots of mixed reviews on the last chapter, but I expected that. Thanks to everyone who commented I appreciate all point's of view! Hope this chapter creates ALL sorts of feels for you :-) will upload another very soon which will be Riki's return home to Iason.

Peter appeared with two glasses on a tray and offered one of them to Katze who had been summoned to Raoul's condo just a short while ago. He noticed that the black-market dealer did not seem pleased to be here.

Raoul accepted his drink, needing it after the meeting with Jupiter. "Did you see to that matter as I requested?"

"Construction on the new room will begin tomorrow, Sir," Peter advised. "Anjell will be released the day after tomorrow."

"Good."

Katze watched as the Furniture walked away, then looked back at Raoul. "Anjell, isn't that..."

"I've acquired the pet from Rodin, as he's had his pet privileges revoked for his part in the attacks against Iason."

“Why didn’t you just send him to the docks?” Katze asked, as that was where most pets were sent when their masters no longer wanted them, there or to Ranaya Uugo.

“Anjell assisted in our investigations. I do not believe it fair just to send him off when he had been so helpful.”

Fair? When did a Blondie every worry about something being fair? “You’re going to use him for your experiments, aren’t you?”

“Of course.” Raoul almost smiled at how easily Katze saw through him, when few others could. “So little is known about the Unicyn. It simply makes sense to properly investigate their biological assets.”

“So, he’s no better off than he was with Rodin?”

“He is now my pet and I will care for him accordingly.” Raoul sat back and crossed one leg over the other. “I will not damage the boy, I need only samples of his DNA. A blood test and occasional physical to record his responses.”

Katze knew there was more to it than that. “How long will you keep him alive then?”

“As long as he satisfies me, he will be safe.” Raoul leaned forward, intrigued. “Are you worried for him, Katze? Did you wish to be a champion to his cause?”

“He’s a pet, I don’t give a damn about it one way or the other.” Katze rose. “I have work, so if there’s nothing else...” The fingers that closed around his wrist could have easily broken bone, but he didn’t even flinch.

“I did not say you could leave.”

“I see no point to my staying.”

“We were in the middle of a discussion before I was called away earlier, and now we shall continue it.” Raoul did not look up at Katze, but nor did he let go of the man’s wrist.

“Right.” Katze sat down and Raoul released him. “You wanted to me to take a trip with you. I’ve looked at my schedule and I won’t have any free time this week and next week I have been ordered to take a vacation so I’ll be off planet for a while.” He had not intended to really take Iason’s advise but he realized he could use the time to avoid Raoul, and Raoul could not justly order him to do otherwise as the vacation was Iason’s idea.

“How long is awhile?”

“Two, maybe three weeks.”

“Where are you going?”

No way would Katze reveal that. “I haven’t decided. I think I’ll just play it by ear.”

Raoul sat back again, his fingers tightening on his glass. “You haven’t touched your wine.”

“No.” Katze deliberately pushed his glass further away from him; the restaurant had been a public venue and was reasonably safe, but he’d learned his lesson last time about drinking at Raoul’s apartment. “I won’t eat or drink anything you offer me here, Raoul. I’m sorry if that offends you, but my loyalty to Iason comes first.”

“And if I give you my word that I shall not doctor your meals or drinks?”

“I still won’t touch it.”

Raoul turned his gaze on the red-head. “You dare to doubt my word?”

“I doubt your ability to keep it against your eagerness for experimenting.”

Raoul studied him quietly, saw his hands twitch twice towards his pockets. “You want to smoke?”

“Yes.”

“Very well, let’s do that.” Raoul rose and walked over to the balcony, stood by the archway and waited for Katze to follow. Finally, the red-head

complied and they stepped onto the balcony. Katze offered a cigarette to Raoul, who accepted, then lit one for himself. “Why do you smoke?”

Katze shrugged. “Habit, I suppose. I like the feeling it gives me.”
“What feeling is that?”

Control, fulfillment. “Sophistication,” he lied easily.

Raoul inhaled, seemed to consider it. “I simply like the taste, I think.”

Again, Katze shrugged, turned away from the view and leaned against the rail, the tobacco filling his lungs gave him some relief from his uneasiness.

“I am disappointed in you, Katze. You agreed to help me.”

“I will, when I get back from vacation.”

Raoul moved to stand in front of the Human. “I don’t wish to wait that long.” He inhaled deeply, then suddenly leaned forward and captured Katze’s lips, exhaling the smoke into the former Furniture’s mouth. He felt Katze stiffen, but perceived no further reaction. He pulled back, stared at Katze intently.

“What...” the red-head began only to have his mouth captured and kissed more thoroughly. He reached behind and gripped the railing, hard enough to make his knuckles turn white as he struggled to swallow his rising panic.

Raoul released him again and stared directly into his eyes. “Well?”

“Well what?” Katze was astonished that his voice sounded normal.

“How did that make you feel?”

“What does it matter?”

“Answer me.”

Katze’s eyes narrowed. Was this the experiment that Raoul wanted his help with? “I felt nothing.”

“Truly?” Raoul frowned. It couldn’t be his technique, he had studied up on several different ones. His raised an eyebrow. “You’re lying.”

“If this is the experiment you need help with then use your pets.”

“I am not Iason, I would never kiss my pets in such a way. They would serve no purpose as they are conditioned to respond, however as Furniture you should have no feelings of arousal or sexual...”

“Then use another Furniture!”

“You are the only one who can assist me in this. You are a Furniture that is permitted to live outside of his service role. You live apart from your Master, you run a business and have experienced life differently than other Furniture. I am curious about this, about you and how this has affected you.”

“No.” Katze coldly refused. “I didn’t agree to that.”

“Iason agreed.”

“Not to this.” Katze pushed Raoul back and stepped around him. “I’m leaving.”

Raoul grabbed Katze’s arm and spun him back around. “I requested Iason’s permission as a courtesy,” he stated, his fingers tightening painfully on Katze when he tried to pull away. “I do not require it. All I require is the agreement of three other Blondies and a rule is passed.”

“I *belong* to Iason,” Katze countered firmly. “The rules of ownership clearly state that no Human or Elite can command Furniture beyond the polite necessities without their Master’s specific permission, unless said Furniture has been insubordinate. Whereupon said punishment is left to a vote by no less than three Blondies, other than the Furniture’s Master. I have done nothing to warrant such a vote and you cannot request one without proof of insubordination.”

Raoul studied Katze, impressed at having his bluff called. “You are no longer considered Furniture. You are too old by the new laws, or rather the old ones that have been put into effect, so this law does not apply to you.”

“It applies to anything Iason Mink considers to be his property and I am that!”

“I promised Iason not to harm you and I will not. If you truly feel nothing, then my experiment should not be of great concern and will only take up a small portion of your time.”

“I’m not a pet to be played with.”

“I do not wish to play with you, merely to ascertain if Furniture remains true to their training after a certain age or if their programing can fail. Since Daryl and now Bean are proof that something can go wrong, there is a logic to my request. This is necessary to ascertain if Furniture should live and be used beyond a certain age or if their conditioning will eventually break down and become troublesome.”

Raoul’s cold and calculating words were no surprise to Katze, most Blondies considered Furniture to be things and not people. “I can tell you the result of your experiment right now, there will be no response. There will be no reaction and no emotion attributed to your actions.”

“You are lying again.” Raoul yanked Katze closer so their faced were only an inch apart. “When I kissed you your pulse rate increased, a sign of arousal or excitement or...”

“Or fear!” Katze snapped as he shoved the Blondie away, catching Raoul off guard and managing to physically push past him.

Fear? Why would Katze fear a kiss? He had seen the man kissing that alien to fool her into revealing her plans about Iason. “Do you fear that my hypothesis is correct? That you will begin to feel...?”

“Fuck you.” Katze backed up into the living area towards the exit portal. “Fuck you! I’m done!” He dove through it before Raoul could catch him.

Guy tossed back his covers, frustrated. This was insane! Why the hell was he dreaming about an Onyx? He couldn't get the picture of Shiao's naked body out of his mind. Couldn't stop thinking about the kiss they had shared and how much better it had felt in the dream.

Growling, he sat up against his headboard. His hand drifted over his own arousal, brought on from the dream.

Shiao stood on the second-floor balcony of Guy's bedrooms and watched as the mongrel freed himself from his shorts and started to stroke a long, thick erection that seemed impossibly pale in the moonlight.

He'd heard Guy moaning in his sleep and had intended only to slip over to the Human's side to ensure his companion was okay. He had not expected to find the mongrel masturbating, nor did he expect the overwhelming excitement it caused within him. When was the last time he had watched another pleasure themselves? Probably not since well before his own pet had passed away, several decades before. He'd believed he was beyond such needs, such savage voyeurism, but it appeared that was not the case.

Since linking with Iason he'd noticed the return of several of his baser emotions. He'd always felt a mild attraction for Guy, but had refused to pursue it as he knew how the Human felt about Elites keeping pets. The boy Riki had become the pet of Iason Mink and Guy had not adjusted well to the idea.

It had been relatively easy to bury his attraction for Guy and allow his logic to dictate more of his actions than the emotions that used to control him, but he found himself recently thinking of the mongrel far too much of the time. He liked Guy, felt comfortable with him and Guy treated him like a true friend, instead of the freak or fiend so many others did.

Guy did not care that he was flawed and the last of his kind. He did not care that he was an Elite of Tanguara, albeit it one that was an outcast and forbidden from ever setting foot in the place where he was created.

Guy's soft moans made him wet his lips in hunger and he wanted to move inside the room to see more, to see Guy's full naked human body open and exposed as the man panted with pleasure. He wanted to touch that pale, pliable flesh, taste the seed that spilled from that...

Shiao hummed and wet his lips again, then realized his mistake as Guy suddenly shifted. He moved back into the shadows, even as he heard Guy scramble from the bed and moved towards the balcony. Shiao was back on his own side of the balcony as Guy stepped out.

"Who's there?" he demanded and glanced around, then up towards the roof and down to the ground. "Hello?"

Shiao stood absolutely still, Guy's hearing was quite good for a Human and he knew if he moved in the slightest he would give himself away. Normally he would not bother to hide, no one would deny him his rights to watch Guy, even as an outcast Elite, but he felt that he had betrayed Guy's trust somehow and so stayed hidden.

"Shiao? Are you there?"

Be still. Be quiet.

"Come on, were you just out here?" The gap between their two balconies wasn't huge, but it was very high up and much farther than he could jump. It would be nothing for the Onyx to bridge. "This is freaking me out. Shiao?"

Shiao finally moved into the moonlight. "I apologize, Guy. I did not mean to disturb you, but from the sounds you were making... I was concerned you were feeling ill."

"Oh." Guy blushed and glanced out at the view instead of meeting Shiao's quiet gaze. "I was dreaming, sorry."

“I am the one who intruded, there is no need for you to apologize.”

Guy gripped the balcony railing. “So...I guess you saw...that.”

“I did not mean to.”

“I know. I’m not mad or anything, I mean, fuck we’re just two guys anyway, right?” They’d seen each other naked multiple times from when they took a bath together.

“I am not Human, Guy, so I do not believe that applies.”

Guy shrugged, uneasily. “It’s still okay. I mean...you didn’t mean it and I didn’t know you were there, but it’s just...” He released his hands together and rubbed them on his shorts, then realized that probably looked worse and clasped them behind his back instead. “In Ceres, we were pretty open about sex. People did it in bars or cars or in alleys, whenever they couldn’t afford a room. It’s no big deal...what you saw.”

“Perhaps not, only...”

Guy finally turned back to the Onyx. “Only?”

“It would be unwise to continue. You should return to bed, Guy.”

“Come on, we said no secrets, right?”

Shiao had made that agreement and for the most part had kept that promise. He found himself reluctant to be truthful this time, because he was concerned it would change his relationship with Guy.

In the end, he decided to be honest anyway, because he’d never had anyone he could be completely truthful with and he did not want to lose that either.

“I enjoyed watching you, Guy.” His heightened senses could detect the subtle temperature rise in his friend’s body. “It is a side effect of the organic brain that Jupiter gave us, but I have buried such urges for a long time. I apologize for reverting to something I know you find distasteful.”

“Why do you think I find it distasteful?”

Shiao took a step closer. “You have made your opinion on the keeping of pets quite clear.”

“Yeah, but I’m not a pet.”

Shiao blinked slowly and recalculated. “No. You are not a pet. I am however an Elite.”

“A discarded Elite who doesn’t belong with those other ones anymore.”

“True, but I still hold many of the same vices, Guy.”

Guy moved to the left of the balcony so they were directly opposite each other. “You had a pet once.”

“I did.”

“And he died.”

“He did.”

“Why didn’t you ever get another?”

Shiao considered this question. “Why are you asking me this?”

Guy shrugged and decided that since the cat was mostly out of the bag, he should just go for it. “Did you really feel nothing when we kissed?” Guy was very good at observation and had become used to Shiao’s idiosyncrasies and nuances. He saw the moment the Onyx decided to recalculate his answer, literally with the blink of an eye. “No secrets remember? We’re being honest.”

“I was moved by the kiss. I apologize for denying it, however I did not wish you to measure me in the same stance with which you consider Iason Mink. I would never trouble you in that way, Guy.”

Somehow, Guy knew that and it made all the difference. Knowing that Shiao would always defer to him, always allow him the choice meant that

the Onyx did not consider a Human just an object. “Do you want another?”

“Kiss?”

“Pet.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I have no need of one at the current time.”

“But you liked watching me jerk off?”

“I did.”

“So, if you got a pet, you could watch that all the time, right?”

Shiao suddenly leapt to the other balcony and landed silently beside Guy, who stumbled back, startled. “How would *you* feel about that, Guy? Watching me fondle and play with a Human pet?”

Guy swallowed several times, this conversation was not going as he had expected and he had to recover his footing quickly. “It’s your house, and has nothing to do with me.”

Shiao caught Guy’s wrist, yanked him closer and inhaled deeply. “I can *smell* it on you.”

“S...smell what?”

“Pheromones. Sex. You are aroused still.”

Guy tried to pull away. “That has nothing to do with you!”

“You started this line of conversation, so it has everything to do with me.” He inhaled again, brought his lips close enough that they almost touched Guy’s neck, almost. “Do you want to touch yourself Guy? Will you allow me to watch you do so? Shall we both get something out of this?”

“I...” Guy was harder than he had ever been and for the life of him couldn’t understand why. His pride and reasoning was waring with a suddenly powerful desire. “I’m not a pet!”

“No.” Shiao suddenly released him. “And I am not Iason Mink. I would not have intercourse with you, Guy, but I would watch if you allow it. It has been a long time for me, and we could both derive pleasure from it.”

“Is...that what you really want to do?” Guy whispered, overwhelmed by the sudden need chorusing through him. It had been so long since someone, anyone had touched him or made him feel desired. “You just want to watch and not...” He lifted an unsteady hand to Shiao’s chest. “Touch?”

He did want to touch, Shiao realized, and he could not entirely blame his link with Iason for this recovery of such desire. He had never crossed the line with Terian because he had been so fearful of killing him, as he had the woman, but he’d thought about it endlessly when his pet was alive.

Shiao caught Guy’s fingers, wondered at how small they were against his own much larger hand. “We are friends. I would not wish to do anything that would change that, Guy.” And he did not want Guy to grow to resent him by comparing him to a certain Blondie, a being whom Guy detested.

“It won’t.”

“I am an android, an Elite of Tangura in form if not in name.”

“I’m a mongrel of Ceres. So what?”

“I cannot be your mate.”

“I can’t be your pet.”

They stared into each other’s eyes,

“Where then does that leave us?”

Guy wondered the same but found he didn’t really care about the answer. He trusted Shiao, he cared about him more than he thought he ever could.

Shiao would never be his master, and he would never belong to him, but maybe...maybe there was some place in the middle they could be together. Some place that no one else would ever know about.

“I don’t think you’re anything like Mink,” Guy whispered and moved closer, slid his arms around Shiao’s waist and laid his head against the Onyx’s chest. It was an odd stance for him, as he had always been the taller one in his relationship with Riki. “I know you wouldn’t hurt me intentionally and I would never betray your trust.”

Shiao could hurt Guy, and probably would if he crossed that line again. He knew he should step back, return to his room, and yet he found he could not. “What are you saying, Guy?”

He lifted his head and met Shiao’s probing gaze. “We’re friends, we’ll always be friends.”

“We are also employer and employee.”

“Those are just words, they don’t mean anything.” Shyly he caught Shiao’s hand and pressed it against his groin. “It’s just sex, just a way for both of us to find relief. We don’t have to put any other meaning to it.”

Shiao’s eyes narrowed as his fingers caressed Guy’s erection through the thin shorts. “I cannot do this, Guy.”

“I thought you were fully functional? Riki says Iason and he...”

Shiao held up his hand. “I am capable of the act, but is forbidden for us.” And he didn’t wish to lose control. He did not wish to hurt Guy as he’d hurt that woman.

“It didn’t stop Iason.”

Is that why Iason had crossed the line with his pet, because of the data that Jupiter had taken from Shiao to help create the Blondie? Had his defects carried over into Iason? “That is different.”

“Why?”

Iason has more control, he always had more control over himself, even when they were linked, even during Iason's most vulnerable state the Blondie had an incredibly strong and steady mentality. "We are different. I am not Iason Mink."

"That's the point." Guy stepped back into his room, pulling Shiao with him. "It's okay, It's easy." They bumped up against the bed and Guy turned so he could gently push Shiao onto the mattress. "I'll make you feel good too."

Shiao caught Guy's roaming hands and sat up when Guy tried to straddle him. "I do not wish to hurt you, Guy."

"I'm not worried." Guy unfastened the snaps on Shiao's tunic.

"You should be."

"Why?"

What if he lost control? "I do not wish for you to hate me, Guy."

"I could never hate you."

"You may resent me later, perhaps because I am like Iason. I do not wish to..." Shiao stopped talking as Guy pressed a finger against his lips.

"You are nothing like him. Nothing at all." He pulled his shirt off and climbed onto Shiao's lap. "You're not forcing me to do this, this is my choice. That makes all the difference in the world."

Shiao opened his mouth to counter and his eyes widened as Guy's lips were suddenly plastered to his own. A thousand synapsis suddenly exploded in his brain as his hands gripped the mongrel's arms hard enough to leave bruises on the non- mechanical one.

"Ow!" Guy gasped. "What's wrong?"

Shiao stared up into Guy's eyes, searching for the answer he did not have, He wanted to do this, he had never wanted anything more, but at what cost? "You need a safe word, Guy."

“What? What’s that?”

“If I am doing something that hurts you, you need a safe word.”

“You’re not gonna hurt me...” He winced as the fingers on his arms tightened. “Ow! *Now* you’re hurting me.”

“And I can hurt you further, which is why you need a safe word. A word that I will program within myself to immediately stop what I am doing.”

Guy’s eyes widened. “Won’t you know what you’re doing?”

Shiao stared at Guy, his hard grip on the mongrel’s arms became a shy, almost awkward caress as he considered the consequences of what he was about to reveal. He had never told another sentient being of his sin except Jupiter and she had known by her own accord, not by his confession.

“I do not know,” he admitted quietly. “I have done this once before and I lost control. I hurt a woman, badly. That person died because of my loss of control. If you wish to stop this now we can and will never speak of it again, but if you wish to continue you need a safe word.”

Guy pulled back and Shiao instantly released him. He could already sense the withdrawal in his friend’s demeanor, and could not fault Guy for it. Guy had never treated him like an Onyx, so the proof that he was one, and a defective one at that, certainly warranted the end of their friendship.

Shiao closed his eyes for a moment, wishing things could be different, then slowly rose. “As you say, it is your choice and you have made it. I can arrange for a new apartment for you, given the circumstances, but I hope you will continue to work for me. Your skills are greatly valued.”

When Guy didn’t respond, just continued to sit on the bed and stare down at his hands, Shiao moved to the bedroom door, rather than exiting through the balcony.

“I regret disappointing you, Guy. Over all you will find...”

“Moon.”

Shiao paused and turned back to find Guy watching him. "I beg your pardon?"

"Moon," Guy repeated quietly. "That's my...safe word."

A flurry of emotions sparked within Shiao all at once and caused him to wince slightly as he worked to quickly shut them down or calm them. "I do not understand."

Guy rose, pulled off his shorts so he stood in full naked glory. "We've both got things in our past we're not proud of, Shiao." He thought of what he had done to Riki, how badly he had hurt and betrayed his best friend. "It's all in the past and I don't wanna live there anymore. I want to live here, in the present, with you."

Shiao took a hesitant step forward, unable to believe what he was hearing. Guy was accepting him, despite what he had done? "This is dangerous, Guy." There would be no going back to their former relationship if they crossed this line. "And it is forbidden. Do you truly accept the consequences of what we are about to do?"

Guy moved towards him. "Me and Riki grew up on the streets of Ceres. Everything was dangerous, everything was forbidden, we survived by not giving a fuck." He reached up and touched Shiao's cheek. "I don't give a fuck about what you did before. People die all the time. I only care about what you do now, and what I want you to do, is me."

"Are you sure?"

"Moon. Program it, remember it, whatever you gotta do, if it makes you feel better, but I don't think I'll use it."

Shiao closed his eyes again and installed the word in his mind, along with a command for a full system shut down if he did not instantly stop his actions upon hearing it. His system would automatically reboot twelve hours after the shutdown, giving Guy more than enough time to recover or run as the boy saw fit.

Slowly Shiao opened his eyes and looked down to find Guy was still there, still waiting and still beautifully naked. "It is done."

"Good, now can we..." The remainder of Guy's words were swallowed by Shiao's viciously hungry mouth. He wrapped his arms around the Onyx's neck and his legs around Shiao's waist as he was carried back to the bed. He laughed in surprise as Shiao dumped him on the bed so he could disrobe, then the Onyx was on him to steal away his breath again.

Lips and tongue and teeth had Guy so close to orgasm already he could barely gasp the word, "Wait!" Shiao's big hands were everywhere, causing sensory overload and Guy barely had time to acknowledge what was happening when he suddenly came. He cried out in both alarm and then pleasure when Shiao's mouth engulfed him quickly enough to catch his spilling seed, and then he was writhing and gasping as the Onyx swiftly brought him to orgasm a second time, and then a third, with just his mouth.

"God! Wait!" he cried and grabbed Shiao by the hair, yanked as hard as he could until the Onyx finally released his cock, and pulled him up for a desperate, needy kiss. "Slow down," he murmured against Shiao's lips, even as he felt a single finger enter his ass.

"I cannot, I warned you." Shiao slid a finger inside Guy and reveled as the mongrel arched against him. "Use the word if you are afraid."

Guy managed to come back to his senses long enough to meet Shiao's gaze. "No." He clasped his hands on either side of Shiao's face. "It feels good. It feels incredible, but I want you to feel good too."

Guy's open acceptance of his desire was almost Shiao's undoing, and he suddenly pulled the mongrel into his arms, cradling him in a tight embrace.

"I am," he whispered.

Guy could never comprehend how satisfying just these few minutes of touching had been for Shiao. It was so much more than when he had felt with the woman. with Guy he was experiencing a pleasure so deep and

profound that he could barely think and each of Guy's moans brought him further satisfaction.

Guy gasped again as a finger explored him again. "We...need lube. It's been awhile..."

Instead of rising to search for the requested product, Shaio swiftly rolled Guy onto his stomach. "No need," he assured as he moved lower to use another form of lubrication.

Chapter 14

Summary for the Chapter:

Riki returns home to find Iason waiting for him.

Riki and Yiela entered the condo quietly but their movements triggered the sensors to illuminate the room and when they did, they found a very annoyed Blondie waiting for them.

“Where have you been?” Iason demanded as his eyes leveled on Riki. “What have you been doing?”

“We’ve been out,” Riki returned flippantly, he was not in a great mood either. He was tired, sore and slightly sick to his stomach. His head was pounding and he felt like his eyes were going to fall out of their sockets. “Cruising.”

Iason was across the room in seconds and grabbed Riki by the front of his shirt. “You *will* answer me.”

“I *did* answer you.”

Iason’s free hand gripped Riki’s shoulder and the mongrel winced. Iason’s eyes narrowed dangerously and it was then he realized someone was missing. “Are you keeping things from me, Riki? Where is Bean?”

“I handled it,” Riki murmured. He was too tired for this shit. “You said it was my choice. If you didn’t trust me with it then don’t give me the responsibility and...” He winced again as Iason’s hand pressed on his shoulder and his exhaustion flipped to anger instantly. “Fucking let me go!”

Iason grip tightened instead, but then he let go. “I have had a very difficult evening, Riki, and you are making it worse. Now, if you do not want me to get angrier with you, then tell me the truth.”

“I can’t!”

“You can’t?”

“What you don’t know can’t hurt us!”

“Riki?” Iason’s paused, his anger turning to concern. He’d said us, not him, a noticeable difference for a mongrel who was usually more self-serving. “What have you done?”

“You said that Bean was my problem and I handled it my way. If you can’t even trust me then sell me off too!”

“I do trust you, Riki, but I insist that we be honest with each other.”

“I can’t, not about this.”

“Why? If you are concerned it will have repercussions...”

“Of course it will!” Riki spun around at Yielā, still standing behind them. “Leave!”

Yielā nodded and quickly departed the room as Riki turned back to Iason. “I did something stupid, but it had to be done, I can’t tell you about it because it might compromise you, besides, you don’t tell me everything you do?”

“I tell you what is relevant, Riki.”

“What about your business? What about all the shady deals that Katze does for you? What about all your spies and the information they have?”

“None of that has anything to do with you, so there is no point in discussing it.”

“Right, and this doesn’t have anything to do with you. This is my deal. Mine! I did this on my own!”

“Riki, where is Bean?”

“Gone! He’s gone and he’s never coming back!” Riki hoped he would never come back anyway, but Bean was manipulative and smart. Maybe he’d

better check again in a few days, make sure.

“Did you terminate him?”

“No!” Not directly, Riki added silently. Please! Please stop asking me. “I can’t tell you. I won’t tell you! I took care of this, just leave it at that. Why can’t you just leave it at that?”

Seeing how adamant his lover was, Iason stepped forward and caressed Riki’s cheek. “I worry for you, Riki.”

“Well, don’t. I was taking care of myself long before I met you.”

“If you are putting yourself in danger, I must know!”

“I’m not!” Riki tried to reign in his temper. “I *needed* to do this. Sometimes you need to do things because they have to be done, will this was mine!”

“This isn’t just about Bean’s punishment,” Iason realized. “Is this about Cal?”

Riki lowered his eyes. It was about more than Cal, but Iason didn’t need to know that. He’d been too cowardly to save Mimea from Raoul’s wrath, and too uncaring to save Daryl from termination. He couldn’t save Guy from fucking up his life by going after Iason and...worst of all, he couldn’t save his father from being eaten by aliens.

Each and every time he had put himself first, clinging to his own survival, preferring to save himself pain or punishment by ignoring the plight of others. That was who he was, who he’d had to be to survive life in Ceres, but he wasn’t just a mongrel anymore. He had a family and a people, even if he didn’t fully trust or understand them. He’d hadn’t been born a mongrel and his fate could have been so much different. A fate that had been stolen from him and left him to be a slum-mongrel and a Blondie’s pet.

He didn’t know who he was anymore, but what he did know was that a lot of people had put their lives on the line to help him, several times now. Iason, Katze, Cal, Carrie and even the woman who claimed to be his

mother. People were ready to do that for him and it wasn't because he was the leader of a gang, it wasn't because they feared him or wanted something from him; at least if they did want something they hadn't shown what it was yet. He couldn't understand it, any of it. It couldn't all be attributed to this supposed power of his, and if it wasn't then what was it? Why did people want him? Why did they care? It made no sense!

The only thing that had made sense was when he had said goodbye to Riki the Dark. While he lapsed for a moment in dealing with Bean, he had to firmly leave that part of him behind now. He had to figure out who he really was, who he wanted to be and why...why all these people thought he was so damn worthy of their protection. He wasn't just a slum-mongrel gang leader anymore, and he didn't really consider himself a pet, but nor did he want to be a Prince. In all honesty, he didn't have the answers yet, but one thing he no longer wanted to be was a helpless, selfish coward.

"Riki, you cannot change what has happened."

"I know that!" Riki stalked across the living room, stepped up and threw open the balcony doors. He moved to the railing, looked out over the city and felt, rather than heard Iason move up behind him.

"Revenge is not the answer," Iason said as he wrapped his arms around Riki.

"Maybe not yours."

"Whatever you did will not change the past."

"I don't need it to, I just..."

Riki took a deep breath. His emotions were taking a rollercoaster ride through his system and he couldn't seem to stop them. Maybe this was more about Cal than he had thought, but how could he explain that to Iason without him becoming upset or jealous? The young Furniture had become like a little brother to Riki, similar and yet very different to the way he felt with Guy. While Cal had done his job as Furniture and had not seemed overly sympathetic to Riki's plight, as Daryl had, Cal still offered wisdom

and insight to get Riki beyond the curse of his own hate and anger. Seeing Cal act so mature had made Riki's immature tantrums seem obsolete and foolish. The younger boy had become a foundation for Riki, accepting all of the mongrel's rage and bullying and yet maintaining a firm hand whenever needed.

Riki had never had a father figure in his life, had only recently remembered pieces of the one that he'd had as a child. Guy and the gang of Bison had been Riki's only family, or so he thought, but Cal became that way for him too. Where Iason could be indulgent when he got his way and cruel when he did not, Cal's methods with Riki never wavered. The rules were the rules, and Cal insisted they be followed, but he had a way of making Riki feel less trapped and abused by his situation and so Riki would often give in more readily to the young Furniture.

Cal had a different reward and punishment system than Iason's and Riki reacted better to it. Cal never got crazy, never got angry or temperamental or jealous, he was a smooth, even anchor in a sea of chaos and Riki often found himself clinging to that. Where he had resented Daryl and the idea of Furniture at first, almost from the first day that he had returned he found he couldn't summon the same resentment for Cal.

Riki reluctantly found himself turning to Cal for support and guidance and the fact that the boy was younger than him was not lost on either of them. The few times when he had seen Cal flustered, speechless, or adorably pleased made Riki's judgement of him soften more and more. He wanted to please Cal, but he also wanted to protect him. Seeing the Furniture as both a father figure and a sibling was confusing, especially added to that was that Cal still held domain over him and was above Riki status wise. Yet, despite his ever-changing feelings for the kid, one thing remained, that he felt he owed the younger boy for helping him get through his return to being a pet. Knowing that Cal had been hurt, been violated was not something Riki could easily forgive or forget.

He glanced down at the mood bracelet he still wore, quietly lifted his hand to show Iason that the color showing was one of anxiety or fear, and that was when Iason noticed the bruises and scrapes on his knuckles.

“I needed to do this,” he whispered. “I needed to do this for Cal. Please understand?”

Iason caught Riki’s hand, examined the torn flesh and forced himself not to ask what happened. “I do understand. I know you care for him.”

“It’s not like that! I don’t want to do him or anything...”

“I *know* that, Riki! It’s fine for you to like him.” Iason pulled Riki into his arms and cursed whatever actions he had taken that made Riki so afraid of even having affection for someone else. “You are allowed to like him as you like Carrie.”

“R...really? You’re okay with it?”

“I am.”

Riki’s feelings for Cal had been obvious for some time, but despite Bean’s earlier claims, Iason never felt even an inkling of jealousy towards his former Furniture. Cal was quite simply not the type to fall for a pet, and he would never betray his Master. That was why Iason had been so enraged when Bean attempted to falsify a relationship between Riki and Cal.

Plus, he knew living in Eos was difficult for Riki and he had worked hard to put aside his instant jealousy at anyone who showed Riki any attention, because he realized that Riki needed to have friends; even he had Raoul and Katze.

Other pets were friendly with each other, but Riki had never been friendly with anyone and had been shunned by most. It was Carrie, being so open and honest that allowed him to realize that he could abide Riki having friends, because that also meant there were more around to protect Riki and watch over him. He also noticed a slight change in Riki, he had recently seen the mongrel flustered and shy and maybe even a moment or two of happiness. That had never happened before, could not have been possible without Riki’s new relationship with the older woman.

“At least promise me whatever happened will not anger Jupiter?” He could not risk losing Riki.

“No. It doesn’t involve anyone else, it shouldn’t even be noticed if you just stop asking what happened!”

Riki had covered his tracks well. The people at Ranya Ugo probably would not file a complaint, and even if they did the authorities would not thoroughly investigate it as places like that were considered wild country and no one really cared what happened there, not even the police.

The administrator and others at the brothel may know what Bean looks like, but they wouldn’t be able to find him, and even if they did learn that Bean had worked for Iason, the boy was no longer here. He had taken a car out without permission, had left Eos without permission. They would assume that he had returned to Ranya Ugo, perhaps to cover his tracks from selling Cal. He had broken the rules and run away before his master could terminate him, that was how it would look. They wouldn’t associate Riki with being a pet because of how he had dressed and acted, and they’d never be able to figure how who Yielia was, so they should both be safe.

“You...what are you gonna do?”

Iason’s response was quiet, careful. “What do I need to do?”

Riki wet his lips, he didn’t want to involve Iason. He had done all of this to keep Iason out of it. Still, it would help to have more security. “What would you normally do if...if your Furniture suddenly disappeared?” Riki held Iason’s studied gaze and willed himself not to look away.

“I’d track him down and destroy him.”

Iason watched Riki’s eyes widen a fraction, but he held the Blondie’s gaze boldly and that gaze told Iason what Riki was expecting. He felt himself grow aroused as he realized that Riki was far more intelligent, far more mercenary than he had ever realized.

He leaned in to whisper. “But for you, I will file a report that Bean was gone when I arrived home, and I assume has fled after being punished. Will that do?”

Riki almost sagged in relief. Unable to express himself properly he could only nod.

Iason caressed Riki’s knuckles. “We should put something on these, unfortunately our Furniture has run away and I am unsure where the medicine is kept.”

Did Iason just make a joke? Riki shrugged, cleared his throat. “I’ll just soak them, it’ll be fine.”

Iason pulled him into his arms. “You have not asked me why I was called away?”

“Not my business, is it?”

“It is, actually.” Iason turned Riki so that he was facing him and ignored the mongrel’s sarcasm. “Jupiter had decreed that you will no longer be a pet.”

Riki stared at Iason, waiting for the punchline. After several long moments, when the Blondie did not continue the joke he said. “What?”

“She had decided that your designation will be changed to something more appropriate.”

Riki stepped back, warily and came up against the balcony barrier. Was this because he had fought her when he was on Avalon? No. No that wasn’t right. Hadn’t she contacted him just a couple of hours ago? He thought back to the brief, yet odd telepathic conversation he’d had with Jupiter in the car.

Riki.

Fuck! Don’t do that!

Riki. Are you well?

Yeah, I guess.

What are you doing? Where are you?

Out. What do you want?

You had your chance to escape this life, why did you chose to return?

Did I actually have a choice?

You remained with Iason.

So?

You were very brave to stand by my son during this recent dilemma, against your own people and a chance for better life. You have proven yourself an asset to me, Riki, which makes you an asset for Amoï. Therefore, I will give you two wishes, for assisting Iason in his return.

Two? I thought the standard was three?

You may think upon the first two and let me know. I will make your last request for you, for I know your heart's desire.

You think so?

Do you wish for freedom? To be free you of Iason's hold? You may leave Tanagura and...

No.

No?

Does my answer not compute?

As I suspected, I do know your heart's desire. Very well, the decision has been made.

Wait! What decision? Jupiter? Jupiter!

She had not responded to him after that and he'd forgotten about it once they went back to Ranaya Uugo. Had her words been a test? Had his refusal to be freed angered the AI? Had she read in his mind what he had been up to? He tried to imagine what was worse than being a pet in and could only think of being a whore in a brothel.

Iason pulled Riki's tense body back into his arms. "Are you frightened, Riki?"

"Yes!"

Iason was surprised by the mongrel's quick confession. "You may have reason to be." He looked down into the dark eyes of the man he adored. "Your pet registration has been changed."

"To what?" Riki wanted to scream but kept his voice level. Why was Iason dragging this out? What did it all mean? "What am I now? What?"

"You've been registered as a commercial grade technician. Jupiter has been made aware of your skills in that area and felt it would be a good choice."

Riki blinked. "T...technician?" For a mongrel to be registered as a technician was almost unheard of. Because so much of Amoï ran on cybernetics and computer systems few Humans were even considered for the position, due to security and classified restrictions, and never anyone from Ceres. "M...Me?"

"You do not seem pleased."

"I...I'm just..." What did this mean? If he was no longer a pet did that mean he had to leave Iason? Go back to the slums or some other city? "I...I said no. I said no!"

Iason tilted his head and felt his love for the mongrel grow more intense. "No to what, Riki?"

"Why is She making me leave? I hate it here but you're here and I promised I would stay and..."

Hearing Riki say the truth that he already knew thrilled Iason to the core and he tightened his hold on the mongrel. “You do not have to leave,” he assured.

Riki had indeed chosen to stay with him. Jupiter had claimed that a choice had been made, which meant that his creator had offered Riki his freedom and Riki had refused. Iason didn’t think he had ever felt this happy in the entire length of his existence.

“There was another part of your new designation. A very lovely part, Riki.” He pulled back and captured Riki’s face between his hands, smiling at his lover’s confusing.

“What...what else?”

“Your new title.”

“Title? Me?”

“Yes. Jupiter had ordained that you, Riki the Dark are no longer just a mongrel from Ceres or a pet of a Blondie, but the Prince High Consort of, me, Iason Mink.”

Expecting Riki to be just as thrilled as he was at the news, Iason was alarmed when Riki’s eyes grew wider and the mongrel swiftly tore himself away to vomit over the side of the balcony.

“The healing wand took care of the bruises, and I’ve inserted a bone generator to help repair the broken rib.” Kanin stated as he straightened from the bed where Riki was sleeping. He’d given the pet a sedative to ease the vomiting that had prompted Iason to contact him, but he had been more concerned about the bruising on the mongrel’s shoulder and left side. “Keep it in for two days and once the light turns green you can remove it.”

Iason had also noticed the bruises on his pet and had been outraged. He had declined discussion about the scraped knuckles because Riki seemed

reluctant to talk about it, but had he known of the other injuries he would have pressed. He felt regret for causing Riki more pain when he had held him, and then anger that Riki had refused to confess that he was hurt.

“What of the other? The sickness? Is that because he was in pain?”

Kanin smirked. “This kid has been through a lot more than this and has never gotten sick before, so I doubt it. But you should be more careful with your temper, Iason. Humans are easily damaged, even strong, prideful ones like this one.”

“I did not do this to him!”

Kanin’s eyebrow rose. “Oh, really? Did he get in a fight with the other pets again then?”

What a noisy, troublesome doctor! “Forget about that and tell me about his illness!” Iason demanded.

“It’s some kind of virus, but not one I have ever seen before. Was he off planet recently?”

Iason nodded and tried to contain his rage. Was it not enough that those people on Avalon had kidnapped Riki and turned his world upside down, but now they had managed to infect him with some foreign illness?

“What can you do? How long will he be ill?”

Kanin shrugged. “I couldn’t say. I can give him medication, but as I don’t know what is causing the symptoms, medication could make it better or it could kill him. There is no way to know.”

“You are a physician! How can you not know?”

“I can’t fight something I’ve never seen before, Iason!” Kanin packed up his small bag of medical tools and supplies. “I suggest you contact someone from whatever planet you went to and ask them for a complete list of known viruses and diseases. Once I see that, I can work out a cure, but until then, all I can do is sedate him to prevent the vomiting and fluid loss.”

“So, you are doing nothing?” Iason demanded following him out of the room. “Riki is ill. You are paid to make him better!”

“Then get me that list! I’m a doctor not a God.”

Iason watched Kanin leave and then bellowed for Yielā, who he had initially denied access to see Riki in his current state. He already felt the woman was far too familiar with his lover.

“Yes?”

He spun around, startled to find her standing behind him. That was odd, usually he could hear someone before they got within twenty feet from him. “Riki is ill and it is your fault.”

“I am not ill,” she stated calmly. “Therefore, I could not have caused his illness.”

“He has been tainted by something on your planet and our physicians do not know what it is. I need a list of ...”

“What are his symptoms?”

How dare she interrupt him! “What?”

“The symptoms that induced you to contact your physician.”

“Vomiting.”

“Does he have a fever?”

“Yes!”

“Are there spots?”

Iason blinked. “Spots?”

“May I see him, please?”

“No. Wait here.”

Iason stormed back to their room and examined Riki's body more thoroughly. He found an odd trail of redish marks scattered across his stomach and headed towards his chest. Were these spots? Iason and Kanin had both thought them bruises. What did they mean? Would Riki die from them? He touched them, they were slightly crusted and rough.

He was startled when Yiel's hair suddenly came into view as she bent over Riki's naked form and practically put her nose to the mongrel's stomach. “Don't touch...”

Iason moved to yank her away but she was already straightening.

“As I suspected,” she said softly. “Spots.”

“What are they?” he demanded, concerned. He had never seen such a thing before. “Can they kill him?”

Yiel smiled and shook her head. “No, it is a childhood affliction which will disappear on its own within time.”

“He is no child! How could he have developed such a thing?”

“All children on Avalon are inoculated to prevent catching the virus. Maku never received the inoculation as he had not reached the required age before he disappeared. It is possible the virus was contracted upon his re-introduction to Avalon.”

“The virus is caused by your planet? Does that make him a carrier? Will everyone here now get this affliction?” Had Iason brought disease and devastation to his planet?

“It is a natural isotope in the atmosphere of the planet. To my knowledge, it only affects our people, which is why we inoculate them at a young age, however we have several alien races visiting for trade and some even living on our planet that have never contracted the infection.”

“That seems a vague answer.”

“It may be prudent to keep him isolated until the disease has run its course.”

“Does he not require the cure?”

“No. Once a person has developed the disease they cannot get it again. The inoculation is merely preventative to prevent unnecessary suffering.”

“Can the virus still spread then?”

Yiela shook her head. “It cannot be spread to others that are not from Avalon.”

“Are you absolutely sure? Your people are Humanoid and there are many Humanoids here as well. Can you confirm that the disease will not spread?”

Yiela opened her mouth, paused and then closed it. “I cannot, as I said we have had many off-worlders come to Avalon and there is no recorded case of any of them contracting the affliction. I will send for the inoculation serum. If any more show signs of the disease, it can easily be administered to the remaining uninfected population.”

Iason nodded then turned back and covered Riki up. “How long will he be sick?”

“Once the spots appear it usually lasts three or four cycles. The vomiting and fever should pass by the next sunrise.”

“What happens after that?”

“The spots will continue to spread and they will burn uncomfortably, however I will also request a salve that we use to take away the burn.”

“Will they scar?”

“As long as he does not scratch them he will be fine.”

Iason nodded. “Do what you can. I will contact my man Katze, he will arrange the fastest ship to pick up and return with the medicine.”

“I could request a courier from Avalon be sent...”

“No.” Jupiter might blast the ship out of the sky given their last encounter and he wanted no more of those people on his world. “Do as I have instructed.”

“Very well. It would be best if you allow me to care for him, as I have seen this disease before.” Also, Maku was hers to care for, regardless of what this Blondie thought. The Prince was her life’s duty.

“You can tell me what to do and I will do it.”

“You cannot be with him all the time, and someone will need to be.”

That much was true, Iason still had a full workload and would not be able to put it off to take care of Riki full time, as much as he wished he could. Despite Jupiter’s choice to change Riki’s designation he sensed things were still very precarious for them both. He could not let his guard down.

However, now they had no Furniture and requesting a new one would take time, plus he was not confident that he wanted a strange Furniture tending to Riki, given the issues with Bean. That left only one option.

“You can also not watch him constantly,” he said and rose. He touched his wrist-com and placed a call to Raoul, who answered almost immediately. “It is time.”

Chapter 15

Summary for the Chapter:

Iason gets help caring for Riki

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks to everyone for the wonderful comments! Hope you enjoy this installment as well as you did the last!

“I’d hoped to have him for another few days,” the Raoul admitted when he took Iason’s call. “He is not quite himself.”

“I am fully aware of what happened, Raoul.” Iason watched Raoul’s eyebrow rise over the small face of his wrist unit and he continued. “I appreciate your position, having given your word, however Katze informed us of everything.”

“Is Bean still there?”

“No. Riki is ill and we need Cal here.”

“Ill?” Raoul showed a flicker of concern. “How is he ill? Is it something I can help with?”

“No. Apparently, it is a disease from Avalon.”

Raoul perked up, interested. “A new disease? Really? We’ll be right over!”

“Raoul.” Iason was grateful for the moment of amusement he felt at his friend’s eagerness. “You are not using Riki to experiment on.”

“No, no. I merely wish to observe, I assure you. If there is a new disease it is better that I know about it in case it affects anyone here.”

Iason couldn't argue for he'd had similar thoughts. "Very well, but do not make a nuisance of yourself."

"Me?" Raoul pretended to look hurt. "When have I *ever* done that?"

"Don't want him..."

Iason turned to see that Riki was awake and shaking his head. "Keep...him away."

Yiela moved in and gently pushed Riki back against the covers, then picked up the cold cloth from the basin on the bedside table and bathed his fevered face with it.

"There you have it, Raoul," Iason smirked. "You have been officially uninvited."

"Nonsense, the boy is obviously delirious and doesn't know what he's saying. We'll be there momentarily."

Raoul disconnected the call and Iason moved to settle beside Riki who was moaning.

"Don't bring him...I don't...trust..."

"Raoul will not hurt you and he is bringing Cal."

Riki's eyes widened. "No." He struggled to sit up. "Not yet. I have to finish what I..." A wave of nausea hit him. "Oh shit." Yiela was prepared with a bowl and she patted his back as he vomited.

"That sedative should have lasted longer than this," Iason growled as he watched Riki violently vomit once again. Then again, medications rarely agreed with the mongrel.

"It is better for him to get everything out of his system and then we can give him water and Juda to cleanse it."

"What is Juda?"

“A drink made from the roots of several plants. I brought some with me and it is good for removing any toxins related to illness.”

“Why...am I sick?” Riki moaned as he flopped back onto the bed. He’d never felt this bad in all of his life. Not the beating he received from the Midas police, or even the torture that Iason had forced on him made him feel this awfully weak. “Why?”

“You caught something on Avalon, Ma...Riki,” Yielā advised bathing his face with the cloth. “It will pass soon, do not worry so.”

Riki moved away from her and reached for Iason’s hand as more bile rose into his throat. “Make it stop.”

“I wish I could, my love.” Iason held Riki’s hand as he continued to expel liquid from his body. “There must be something else to do?” he demanded of Yielā.

“I will prepare a cool bath, once this finishes we will need to get his temperature down.”

Iason recalled their strange wash areas on Avalon. “You will not understand the equipment. What temperature is required?”

“Seventy degrees.”

He nodded and walked into their adjoining washroom.

Riki finally stopped throwing up just as the bedroom door burst open and a flurry of green and white entered.

“How’s the patient?” Raoul asked cheerfully.

“Ah fuck,” Riki moaned “Now I really am gonna be sick.”

Iason stepped out of the washroom and moved to greet Raoul, then looked behind his friend to the pale young Furniture behind him. “Welcome home, Cal.”

Cal bowed his head slightly. "Thank you, sir." When Raoul had told him that he was to return to Iason's condo he'd had a moment of sheer panic, but when the Blondie mentioned that Riki was ill, his panic had turned to concern.

"Hey, you," Riki greeted weakly and felt his chest tighten. Cal looked as ill as he felt. He was impossibly pale and had lost weight, at least ten pounds. The boy's eyes were hollowed out, like he had not slept in weeks. It was obvious the kid wasn't ready to be back here. Damn, why had Iason called for him? Because you got rid of Bean, he reminded himself bitterly.

Cal gathered all his internal resources into appearing normal, strode across the room and stopped next to Yiel. "Allow me, please." He took the cloth from her, discarded it in the bowl of water and put his hand to Riki's forehead, then against Riki's chest. He counted the number of shallow breaths Riki managed. "A cold compress works better for Riki as his body tends to naturally generate a lot of heat."

He opened the drawer of the nightstand where he always kept a supply of medicines and opened the two remaining packages of compresses. He applied one to Riki's forehead and then gently lifted the mongrel's head and placed one on the back of his neck between his shoulder blades, but as Riki was pushed forward the urge to vomit hit him once again.

"Shit..." He managed as Yiel swiftly started towards him and offered the bowl.

"How often is he vomiting?" Cal asked.

"Every few minutes," Iason replied. "Kanin gave him a sedative but it does not appear to be working."

"He will purge all from his stomach shortly..." Yiel began but Cal cut her off.

"It won't do for him to suffer through it." Cal applied pressure to Riki's inner arm and held tightly until Riki's vomiting and urging stopped. "Better?" he asked, softly.

Riki managed to nod gratefully, his throat was so incredibly raw and his stomach was cramping painfully, but the desire to throw up had nearly vanished.

“Let’s get you in the bath then.”

“Wait,” Riki murmured as Cal started to pull back the covers and Riki desperately tried to keep a hold of them. “Wait!”

Iason was confused by Riki’s reaction, but Cal was already gathering a sheet around Riki’s naked form.

“Perhaps your guests should wait outside, Sir?” the boy suggested, glancing towards Iason but leaving his eyes hooded beneath thick lashes. He did not yet have the stamina to look at his Master directly, not now that he was so badly disgraced.

“Yes, that is best.” Iason met Raoul’s gaze. “Raoul.”

“I’m not a guest. I’m family. We are brothers after all...”

“Be that as it may I must ask you to step outside.”

“How can I observe this new disease if I am dismissed?” Raoul demanded, although he was relieved to see Cal take charge. Perhaps the Furniture simply needed a task to concentrate on in order to feel better.

“It will make Riki more comfortable,” Iason countered.

“It’s not as if I haven’t seen the pet naked before,” Raoul remarked but moved towards the door. “I am helping myself to your wine, Iason.”

Iason nodded as his friend stepped out. “Yiela, leave Riki to Cal.”

“I will assist you...” Yiela began but Cal stopped her cold, even though his tone remained polite.

“It is inappropriate for you to do so, Miss. Please wait in the other room while we put Master Riki in the bath.”

“Go,” Riki agreed weakly. “This...is what he does.”

“Your will be done.” She nodded and stepped out.

Iason carried Riki into the washroom and gently placed him in the bath, followed by Cal who tested the waters before he allowed Riki to be submerged.

“What are these spots?” the boy asked, concerned, and Iason explained it to him.

“I see. We should let him soak only for twenty minutes then return him to the bed.” He settled on the rim of the large tub. “Do they hurt?”

Riki shook his head, and moaned as the cool water soaked into his feverish skin. “No.”

“Well, best not to use a scrub and risk irritating them.” Cal rose and pulled a small pouch containing delicate blue crystals from the cupboard. “This will get rid of any bacteria without scrubbing.” He dropped a handful of the salts into the bath. “Try not to rub them.”

Riki reached for Cal’s hand and watched as the boy neatly avoided it. He lowered his head, suddenly despondent. “Thanks....for coming back,” he managed and cursed himself even more.

He should have waited! He’d been too quick to act. If only he’d known he would get sick he would have left Bean here so that Cal could properly recover. Fuck. Fuck. FUCK!

Cal glanced back as Riki’s last thought was emphasized by a large splash of water.

“I’ll watch him for now, Cal.” Iason offered seeing the distress on his lover’s face and the slight trembling of his Furniture.

Perhaps he had jumped the gun, but no one knew better how to care for Riki when he was ill. Riki was a horribly irritable patient.

“Yes, Sir.” Cal stepped out and Riki splashed the water again and again, each one getting louder as it spoke to his frustration, until Iason crouched down and caught his hands.

“Stop it.”

“Why did you call him? He’s not ready to be back here!” Riki’s face rose and tears swam in his eyes. He should have waited. He should have waited! “He’s so thin, Iason. He’s so fucking thin. He shouldn’t be here! He’s not ready to...”

Iason pulled Riki against him, uncaring that he was soaking the front of his tunic. He was also startled by Cal’s appearance. How could so much have changed in just a few days?

“Obviously staying with Raoul was not lending to his recovery, so perhaps being back home will.” He wasn’t sure how much of that was true, but he needed to give Riki some explanation. “Perhaps he just needs to work and take his mind of things. What he may require is a sense of normalcy.”

“He flinched from me. He’s never done that before!”

“Yes well...” Iason caressed Riki’s hair as the mongrel finally slid his arms around him. Even after all this time Riki still resisted shows of affection and were reluctant to return them at times Except with Cal, and Iason suspected that was because Riki was always the one to reach out to the boy, not the other way around. “You shouldn’t be flirting with him anyway.”

“I never...” Riki began, lifted his head from Iason’s chest and saw the smile waiting for him. “Shut up,” he muttered, shoved away and slid back fully in the water. “I’m hot.”

“I know, love.” Iason ran his fingers through Riki’s hair. “How is your stomach?”

“Churning, but not as bad. Whatever Cal did to my arm it worked on my stomach.”

“Good.” Iason suddenly shoved Riki’s head under the water and watched as the mongrel came up sputtering.

“What the fuck?”

Iason lathered some shampoo into his hands and started to massage it into Riki’s hair. He waited for Riki to protest, as he usually did when Iason tried to do something that Riki considered too intimate, and was pleased when his lover simply sighed and leaned his head back against Iason’s large hands.

“Coulda warned me.”

“I could have, yes.” Iason continued to lather Riki’s hair, then tapped the younger man’s shoulder and let Riki submerge on his own this time. When he reappeared Iason had a heated towel ready and gently rubbed Riki’s hair dry with it. The cold compresses were water proof so he didn’t need to replace them.

“Can I get out now?”

“Another five minutes.”

Riki sighed as Iason turned to massaging his shoulders.

“You haven’t said anything,” the Blondie said quietly.

“About what?”

“Your new status.”

Riki felt his stomach start to churn again. Iason hadn’t been serious about that had he? Prince High Consort? What the hell did that even mean? He started picking at the injuries on his fingers, but Iason gently reached around and captured them.

“Riki.”

“What does it mean?”

“It means you are no longer a pet.” Iason used his thumbs to massage Riki’s fingers. “You may move freely about Eos and Tanagura.”

“You said I had a tech registration now?”

“Yes.”

“So...I could get a job?”

Iason stilled for a moment. “I provide for all your needs, so there is no need for that.”

“But I could get one now if I wanted, right?” Riki turned and looked at Iason. “I could work and make my own money.”

Iason rose suddenly and reached for another heated towel. “Your time is up, step out now.”

“Can I work or not?”

“Yes!” Iason snapped and then reigned in his temper because he had not anticipated this result.

He had been so happy to just have Riki stay by his side. He thought Riki would be pleased at his new title, it meant people would no longer harass him or look down on him. Why was he focusing on something as insignificant as a technician registration, which was no doubt added as an afterthought to remove the pet registry?

Riki slowly stepped out of the water and let Iason wrap the large towel around him. “Don’t be mad,” he grumbled. “I’ve had a shit day and I feel awful and I can’t take you being mad at me right now.”

“I am not angry,” Iason assured as he rubbed Riki dry, being careful of his injuries.

He remembered Riki’s broken rib and checked the monitor which was still showing red. Like the compresses, all medical equipment in Tanagura was

also waterproof because so much of it was used in the healing chambers which were usually flooded with antibacterial fluid.

“Do your ribs hurt?”

Riki remained silent.

“Riki?” When Riki still refused to answer, Iason caught the mongrel’s head between his hands and kissed him soundly, knowing he would at least get a physical response.

“Stop it!” Riki pushed away.

“Then answer me.”

“No more than they usually do when I break one!”

Iason scowled. “How often have they been broken?”

“Eight, nine times maybe.” Riki held out his arms so Iason could slip a robe on him. “You’re still mad.”

“I am not mad, I just don’t see why you would want to go to work.”

“What else is there for me to do?”

Stay here, Iason wanted to scream. Wait for him to come home, be ready to eat dinner together or read, or be taken to bed.

“I provide for us, Riki. It’s what you do for...” Iason broke off as he realized what he was about to say.

“For a pet.” Riki tied the sash of the robe and met Iason’s gaze. “So, nothing really changes then? I have this fancy new title but I’m still just your plaything.”

“No. No, Riki that is not what I intended. You know you mean more to me than that and..” He watched Riki waiver and barely caught his beloved as

Riki's legs gave beneath him. How could he forget that Riki was ill? This was not the time to be having this conversation.

"I...I'm okay," Riki assured but was already being lifted into strong arms. "I'm just dizzy, that's all."

Iason exited the bathroom and placed Riki into their bed, which now sported clean, fresh sheets. Cal was waiting for them with a glass of liquid.

"What's that?" Riki eyed the glass suspiciously.

"It will help you sleep."

"He was already given a sedative," Iason warned as he tucked the sheets around Riki.

"It is just an herbal tea and will have no affect against the medication." Cal offered the glass to Riki who shook his head.

"I hate tea."

"You need to rest so your body can begin to repair itself and you must replenish the fluid you've lost."

"I don't want it."

"That doesn't change the fact you have to drink it."

"Riki, drink the damn tea," Iason ordered.

"I hate tea!" the mongrel whined and Cal could tell the illness was getting the better of his charge. "I don't want to throw up again!"

"You won't," Cal assured. "I promise you won't."

"Riki, do as you're told and stop behaving like a child."

Riki kicked his feet under the cover and winced because it reminded him of the pain in his ribs, but he accepted the tea. "If I do, I'm throwing up all

over you,” he warned Iason as he took a sip, winced at the taste and then downed it, quicker was better. He barely noticed the slight pinch in his arm and shoved the cup back at the young boy once it was done. “Happy? It tastes like a bunch of flowers had a shit-fest and won’t even...won’t even...” Riki’s eyes widened just a fraction before they closed.

Iason caught Riki’s head and gently laid it on the pillow. He glanced at Cal. “What sort of tea was that, exactly?”

“An herbal tea, as I said.”

Cal stepped back and that was when Iason noticed the IV needle in Riki’s arm. So, the tea had been a distraction, Riki loathed needles.

“I see.” No doubt the exertion of the bath combined with Riki’s earlier sedative and fever had taken its toll and thus dropped him into unconsciousness. “Stay with him while I deal with Raoul.”

Cal nodded and remained by the bed as Iason stepped out of the room where he found Raoul standing suspiciously close to Yielia.

“Do all of your people have dark skin?” Raoul was saying as he lifted a gloved hand to touch her cheek. “It would truly make pets of a high caliber. I require your DNA for some tests.”

“Remove your hand.”

Raoul lifted his eyebrow. “Why would I do that?”

“I am a guest here and do not wish to cause an embarrassing incident. I say again, remove your hand.”

Raoul’s finger slipped down to her bare shoulder, caressed. “I wouldn’t worry, I am not easily embarra...” Raoul was shocked to suddenly find himself on the floor with both his arms twisted at an awkward angle across his back and the fingers on both of his hands pushed almost all the way back to the break off point. “Well now, you are a quick one, aren’t you?”

“I am for Maku, only he may touch this body.” Yielā advised with her bare legs tightly wrapped around the Blondie’s neck, while her lean body lay flush across his back to keep his arms trapped. “Make no mistake, android, my strength does not compare to yours, though I can remove your head from your body easily enough.”

Raoul caught sight of Iason. “Are you just going to stand there?”

Iason had been stunned at how quickly the Avalonan had moved, so stunned in fact that despite his enhanced speed and skill he had simply stood there and watched it happen. What was this woman? Assaulting an Elite was unheard of, and he found it amusing to see Raoul in such a position. He could kill her, of course, but he knew Riki would be angry with him if he did.

Instead, he walked over and poured two glasses of wine. “Release him,” he said calmly. “I believe that he has learned his lesson.”

“I do so only as to save Maku distress, Iason Mink.” Yielā released Raoul as quickly as she captured him and was several feet away from the Elite by the time he managed to rise. “Do not misinterpret my obedience as an allegiance to your kind.”

Iason handed Raoul one of the glasses of wine and wondered at Yielā’s sudden impudence. “If you wish to remain here you will obey me.”

“I will accede to your requests when they are reasonable, but know this. I will not be kept away from Maku while he is ill. I am for him and it is my duty to care for him.”

“What does this mean, you are for him?” Raoul inquired, curious, even as he rubbed his neck. While he did not feel pain in the same manner as Humans he could still feel discomfort, and certainly humiliation. What kind of alien was this female to bring a son of Jupiter to his knees so quickly? He was absolutely fascinated.

When Yielā and Iason merely continued to glare at each other, he tried another approach. He settled down on the sofa as if all was normal.

“Perhaps if you explained your statement we would better understand your position and avoid future situations like this.”

Yiela’s dark eyes flashed for a moment, but when she watched as Iason settled beside Raoul and quietly study her she decided to answer. She was given the special task of accompanying Maku here to this planet of debauchery in order to protect him and educate him about his own people, yet this machine had continuously interfered.

“When a member of the royal family is born, a Eadbarde is chosen to care for and protect that child. I was chosen for Maku.”

“So, you’re simply Furniture then?” Raoul asked and when she stared blankly at him he reiterated. “A servant. A slave of this royal family.”

Yiela’s dark eyes narrowed. Were these people incapable of thinking in any terms other than slave and master? “I am neither. To be a Eadbarde one must go through years of rigorous training and rites to prove their worth. It is done voluntarily and is a highly-revered position. Thousands of people make the attempt but only a handful are chosen.”

“And how do they choose which one of you will be winner?” Iason asked, curious despite himself.

“Winner?” she asked, puzzled. “I do not understand.”

“What must you do to become the Royal child’s Eadbarde? Who gets to chose the successor?”

“The child does,” she replied as if the answer were obvious. She watched the two Blondies exchanged a look.

“How does an infant choose anything? It is just an infant and has no communication skills or proper facilities for indicating its wants or needs.”

Yiela frowned. These beings believed themselves superior to others and they could not even understand such a simple thing? “When a royal child is born, the successful candidates are brought to the child and it is there the

child chooses their Eadbarde. Once an Eadbarde is chosen they are devoted to that child for the rest of their lives.”

“But how does it chose?” Raoul insisted. “It is a babe! How can it understand what it is choosing?”

“It acknowledges you, of course.” Yielia shook her head. It was not their concern how things were done on Avalon, and she had already said too much. “I am for Maku, that is all you need understand.”

“Riki would have been your responsibility from when he was a babe.” Iason stated quietly as he sipped his wine.

“Yes.”

“Then you are to blame for losing him.” He expected her to deny it, to rage or cry or be offended, so he was again surprised when she responded without hesitation.

“Yes.”

Iason leaned forward, puzzled. “He was with the King, was he not?”

“Yes.”

“Then wouldn’t the blame go more to his father than you? Or is it your practice to remain with the child even when their parents are with them?”

“The situation or presence of another means nothing. I am for Maku and I was unable to protect him.”

She did not reveal the physic bond that that was created between the Eadbarde and their child upon the day of choosing, and that upon the child’s death an Eadbarde would also take their own life. The horror of that link being severed was unimaginable and the agony of could ravaged a person’s mind and body until they were driven to madness, or death.

For all these long years, she had faced the agony of separation from her Prince; the pain, the constant illness, the despondency and desperation as

she was slowly, terrifyingly robbed of her five senses. She had not experienced the feeling before, but had heard tales of it from others and those stories had horrified her. Still, she believed her suffering was due to the young Prince's death. She refused to take her life, choosing instead to live with the horror that her life had become as a form of penance for not protecting the Prince. It had been impossible to think that her charge was still alive and that the link had not been completely broken, merely interrupted by distance instead of death.

Instead of losing all of her senses, she found that they were merely dimmed significantly. She had not seen more than shaded images, or heard anything beyond a faint murmur in nearly twenty cycles. Her sense of touch had all but evaporated, but she was still able to talk, to communicate, even though she could hardly see or hear anything. Along with the robbing of her senses the ongoing pain throughout her body, deep inside, bone deep that throbbed and burned and froze her over and over again through the years had been difficult to stand against. And the trials, the mental trials had been worse than the pain. She saw her beautiful babe everywhere, even after she lost most of her sight, he was never far from her. She would hear his laughter, see his smiling face, wonder at his beauty; and each and every time she would see him, he would be ripped from her and each time the grief was just as dark and agonizing as the first time.

When she learned that the Prince might be alive she collapsed and was unresponsive for half a cycle, but when she awoke and learned that he had been found she wept for four days and nights without eating or sleeping. Once she recovered from that, her senses had completely returned and she was told that the Prince was coming home.

She had felt the moment he entered Avalon's atmosphere, the emptiness and grief burning inside of her was almost immediately replaced by a warm, quickly rising joy. He was no longer the child she remembered, was frightened and resistant to her, and yet she would still give her life to serve and protect him. She was for him. She would always be for him.

"I have accepted your position in Maku's life, Iason Mink," she continued boldly. "I have attempted to show you respect, as this is what Maku would wish, however I must ask that you also accept my position."

“You have no position here. Riki has not been your responsibility since the day he was taken from Avalon.”

“The circumstances and years that have gone by are insignificant. I am for him. I must assist him, care for him and protect him. This is my life’s duty and each time you deny my right to do these things you are also denying Maku the right to be cared for and protected.”

“I can care for and protect him myself.”

“If that were true he would not have been so easily taken from you.”

Iason started to rise and Raoul caught his friend’s arm. “She does have a point,” he offered mildly. “You cannot watch the pet continuously and nor would Riki want you too. You know how he favors his...” Raoul shuddered at the thought. “Independence.”

“I am not here to usurp your position, Iason Mink. I am here to help Maku adjust to the person he is.”

“I *know* who Riki is, I am the one who pulled him out of the darkness so he might live in the light. We have been together for years, he has known you for a few days. Do not try to pretend you know anything about him.”

“Yes, you know the person that he is. I need to help him understand the person that he was so that he can become the person he is meant to be.”

“The King of Avalon?” Iason scoffed. “Riki has no interest in that and if you make any attempt to force him...”

“You will eliminate me?” Yielá sighed and folded her hands in front of her. “I am not afraid of you or your kind. I am more concerned at the suspicion and violence that appears to be within the natural component of the people here. I am here to help Maku not to harm him. I have made no attempt to interfere in your relationship with him, as that is how he wishes it, however if you continue to try and keep us apart this will become an issue.”

Iason raised an eyebrow. “Will it?”

“Do not think that I am naive or helpless, Iason Mink. I do not wish a war with you, I have come here for peaceful relations. Maku needs me and *you* need me to help him understand why. If you continue to interfere you will only bring him more worry and distress. He wishes to know who he is, and you are preventing him from doing that by making him choose between us.”

“She makes a good point...” Raoul began, and then shut up with one icy look from his friend.

“Whatever it is you think I may do to him, you are mistaken. If you cannot move beyond your passiveness and pride you will create a wedge bigger than you can imagine between you and Maku.”

Iason rose then and moved to her. “Nothing and no one will ever come between Riki and myself. You are here because Riki believed he owed a debt to your Queen, but I am not beholden to her or you. We are not on Avalon, this is Amoï and here I make the rules.”

“Have I not complied with your requests thus far? I ask only that you be reasonable...”

“Reasonable?” Were your people reasonable when they tried to take Riki and kill me? You are a stranger and my enemy. Regardless of the circumstances you are here under protest, you do not and will not earn my trust for that reason alone. You may teach Riki what he requires, but you will not be alone with him. You may tend to him while he is ill, but you will be supervised. That is my last word on the matter.”

“You are wasting resources with such a decision.”

“They are my resources to waste. Leave us, I have things to discuss with my guest.”

Yiela held Iason’s cold gaze for several long, impressive minutes. “You are making a mistake,” she said, then quietly turned and headed upstairs towards the room they had put her in.

“Well, that was entertaining,” Raoul said as he rose, picked up Iason’s untouched wine and handed it to him. “If you want to get rid of her let me know, I’ll be happy to add her to my sample list.”

Iason’s grip tightened on his glass and he had to will himself not to throw it across the room. How dare that female try and stake a claim to Riki. His earlier amusement with what she did to Raoul had quickly faded in the face of her outrageous demands. She knew nothing. Riki did not want her here any more than Iason did, but she was needed to help him deal with his power. Once that was done he would ship her back to Avalon on the first transport!

“So, how’s the patient? What’s this new disease he has? I’ve brought my equipment so if you wouldn’t mind my taking just a few drops of blood...”

“No.” Iason forced himself to sip his wine instead of tossing it back in agitation. Even Raoul’s nonsense was not calming him. “Enough about Riki, I wanted to talk to you about Cal.”

“I thought you might.” Raoul nodded and helped himself to another glass of wine.

“He doesn’t look well and he has lost a significant amount of weight.”

“Yes, that would be because he has barely eaten anything the last few days and what he has eaten I am reasonably sure he has expelled just as quickly.”

“The attack has affected him that badly?”

“I don’t know if it is just the attack.” Raoul settled back on the sofa and dipped his hand into the bowl on the table beside it that held a selection of dried Frizen, which was a mixture of seeds and fruits. “I am no counsellor, but given Cal and Bean’s statements I think it is more that Cal no longer trusts food prepared by others.”

“Why?”

“It was Bean that had, so kindly, prepared a snack for Cal with the drugs in the food. Cal obviously suspected nothing and so ate without thought. He must have been very confused and frightened to be eating in the safety of his own home one minute then finding himself at Rayana Ugo the next.”

“I see.”

Iason walked across the room one to of the floor to ceiling windows and thought of the days and nights he and Riki had spent in these rooms, between these walls. Now this woman was here and he could not deny that he felt threatened by her, not by her physicality or beauty, but by the more appealing life she could offer Riki.

“What will you do with him then?” Raoul asked, interrupting Iason’s thoughts.

“I am unsure. I do not wish to force the issue by keeping him here if he is still unwell.” Iason turned around. “Perhaps he should be admitted to a facility?”

“That is an option.” Raoul quietly sipped his wine and thought of how desperate Cal had seemed. “I don’t know that it would be the right one.”

“Why?”

“In all honesty, he has been unusual while he has been with me, very fearful and unsure of himself. He believes he can no longer function properly as Furniture, and he turned positively green when I advised him we were coming here. I worried he might break down in some way, however I was pleasantly surprised how he took charge the moment he saw Riki was ill. It was as if the entire incident hadn’t happened.”

“Technically he is no longer Furniture, but regardless this normalcy in him may not last. I noticed that he shy’s away from being touched, normally this would not be an issue and his personal space could be respected, but Riki has always been slightly more affectionate with the boy, they have become close, and this change has upset him.”

Raoul stared down at his drink. “He asked to be admitted for retraining.” He studied Iason closely, but as usual saw not even a hint of response. “It would solve the immediate problem and make him a proper Furniture again, or at least make him feel like one.

“He is too old to be retrained, they would call for his termination the moment he walked in.” Iason stared off towards the balcony, Riki’s balcony.

Was it the distraction of his brothers and Riki and now this Avalon nonsense that had prevented him from resolving the age law issue for Furniture? He had temporarily circumvented it by listing Cal as a tutor, but Riki was an adult and that duty would be challenged as well before too long, then what would they do with Cal? If Cal was asking to be retrained, that meant he was willing to have his mind wiped and Raoul could do that easily enough. It would end Cal’s suffering but the boy would no longer be Cal. What would they do with him after, and how would Riki react to that?

He remembered the boy they had argued over before they had been attacked and kidnapped. One of Riki’s old gang members, one who had betrayed all of them just for a bit of coin had been turned into a sex doll. It had not been because of the boy’s betrayal, it had been because, like Riki, the boy had been somewhere he shouldn’t have, seen something he shouldn’t have—Tangura’s biggest and darkest secret. But the boy had seen more than Riki had, much more and there had been no other way to properly deal with situation.

If he let Raoul wipe Cal’s mind, even though it was in Cal’s best interest, Iason knew that Riki would not forgive him. He had become so angry over a boy that meant nothing to him, that betrayed him, meeting such a fate, that it would most certainly be the end of their relationship if Iason were to sanction it for a boy Riki deeply cared for.

Iason rubbed at his temples as he felt another headache coming on. Sometimes being Iason Mink was to damn difficult, even for him.

“Perhaps it is simply a matter of time for both of them.” Raoul offered, hoping to put his friend at ease as he glanced around idly. “Where is Bean by the way?”

“Gone.”

“I have not received a termination schedule.”

“He has run away.”

“Really? Why would he do that?”

“To avoid termination, I imagine.”

“Did you wish me to track him down and return him for punishment?”

“No, I’ll deal with it.”

“You have had much to deal with as of late, my friend.” Raoul finished his wine and rose. “Well, you have some decisions to make. As for myself, I am also quite busy and as you have ruined all the fun I expected to have for coming here, I will take my leave.”

“Yes, thank you for bringing Cal back.”

They clapped each other on the shoulder and then Iason escorted Raoul to the door. “Honestly, Iason, when are you going to bring the portals back in?”

“Riki doesn’t like them.”

“Well, I dislike this doors and elevators nonsense.”

“If you lived here I might take that into consideration.” Iason smiled and opened the door. “But as you do not...”

Raoul smirked. “And nor would I wish too. I am quite content in my own place.”

“Raoul?” Iason began as the Blondie started for the door, then turned back. “How are things going with Katze?”

“He has been very helpful,” Raoul lied easily then waved as he stepped into the elevator.

He held Iason's gaze until the door closed, then the smile slid from his face. He'd been disturbed by how the red-head had acted the last time they met. He'd expected animosity or anger, or even surprise, but he had not expected the former Furniture to admit to and display such fear at being kissed. It was something he would need to think on before their next meeting.

Iason closed the door just as Cal walked across the living area. "How is Riki?"

"Still sleeping but his fever has remained steady. I don't wish to give him anything further as he already has medication in his system, so I was going to order up some more cold packs for him to be delivered here immediately."

"That will be fine." Iason saw the hesitation on the young boy's face. "Was there something else?"

"May I ask, Sir, the female...?"

"Yes. Her name is Yielia and she is from Riki's home planet. She will be helping you to care for Riki as he will require constant supervision over the next few days. She does not usurp your authority, Cal."

Iason caught the almost imperceptible flinch in the young man's demeanour and realized that Raoul was right, Cal was not ready to resume his duties, however, if he sent him away now it would most certainly make things worse.

"My authority, Sir?"

"Yes."

"I am merely Riki's tutor. I have authority only regarding his studies." Cal suddenly realized that Riki may not require a tutor anymore as he had already learned of his origin. "Unless that is no longer required of me."

Iason considered mentioning that he was aware of what Bean had done, but decided that it was better to wait until Cal broached the subject.

“As we are currently short on staff, I must ask you to care for him as best you can. I do not wish to bring a new Furniture in while Riki is ill, so you will have to suffice until other arrangements can be made. You are in charge of Riki for now.”

Cal nodded. “As you wish, Sir.”

“You’ll have to sleep in the Furniture quarters behind the kitchen as Yielia has your room.” Iason wondered how Cal would feel sleeping in Bean’s room, he had still not even asked after the younger boy.

“That will be fine, Sir. I’ll just go and order the packs. Would you like me to prepare a meal for you as well?”

“I have to go out and will probably not return until late. Make sure Riki eats something if he is able and I suppose prepare something for yourself and Yielia.”

“Yes, Sir.” Cal moved automatically to retrieve Iason’s cloak. “I will inform you if there is any major change in Riki’s condition.”

“Do that.” Iason paused at the door, considered going to kiss Riki goodbye but his beloved was already asleep. He knew Riki was in good hands and so headed out.

Cal turned the moment the door was closed and slid down it as he started to shake. Where was Bean? Why was the younger Furniture not here? Was he assisting Iason with something else or had Iason learned of Bean’s treachery? If that were the case, did that also mean his Master knew of Cal’s own shame?

Iason and Riki did not appear to treat him any differently than before, and yet...and yet he could not help but worry. It had been so difficult maintaining the charade that he was the same Furniture as before, so terrified he would make a mistake or show his pain and disgrace in front of them. Now Master Iason wished for him to stay here, to tend to Riki, to continue the farce.

He pulled his legs up and rested his head upon them as he pushed back the tears that threatened to burst through. He shouldn't be here, couldn't be here and yet he had to be. He wanted to help Riki get better, he wanted to please his master and yet...and yet it was so very hard just being near them. And where was Bean? How could he lay in that boy's room, knowing it was probably there that Bean had plotted to drug him, to sell him? What if Bean returned and found him there? Would he kill Cal outright? Wouldn't that be better than what he was going through now?

"Oh, dear child."

Cal heard the words only seconds before soft hands were placed on either side of his face and lifting it. "Don't!" he began and was startled when a gentle warmth flowed over him, removing the chill that had been with him for days and causing his shaking to subside.

"You are good," Yiela said softly as tearful, shocked eyes clung to hers. "You are kind, so very, very kind."

"What...what are you doing?" Cal stammered. He knew what was happening was totally inappropriate and yet he couldn't pull away, didn't want to pull away. He was warm, she was warming him and her words, her voice so soft, like the slight flutter of a bird's wing eased the ache in his chest.

"So many love you. So many need you, child. This pain is but a whisper against your strength." Yiela's hands moved from his face up to his head, threading her fingers through his hair as she leaned her forehead to his. So much pain and grief. So much uncertainty, shame and fear. Now she understood why Maku had punished the other. Now she could feel the true tragedy that had been bestowed upon such a cherished soul. "Allow me to ease your burden. Allow me to share your pain."

Cal couldn't speak, couldn't move, all he could do was feel the heat that radiated from her and into him, heard the sound of his own fragility as she gently mended the pieces. And in her eyes, those unfathomably dark eyes witnessed the fire of his grief and shame that slowly, impossibly turned to comfort and acceptance.

When the woman moved away, Cal felt as if a piece of his heart had been wrenched from him, but only for the briefest of seconds, it was gone so quickly that he wondered if he imagined it. A heaviness fell over him, once more cloaking him in misery and he thought he might cry again, but his eyes were surprisingly dry.

He glanced up at her, dazed. The warmth was gone, but not entirely. His fragility was back, but not completely. The shame he had felt since the moment of his attack returned, and yet it did not encompass him as it had before. Everything had eased, ever so slightly. While still not completely himself, he felt just the smallest bit better.

“What was that?” he whispered as he slowly rose, wondering if he should feel gratitude or fear towards her. “What did you do to me?”

“Comfort, only that,” Yielia returned. “Would you like some tea?”

“Yes I...” He stopped himself shocked. Had he just asked someone serve him? Impossible! “No! I...I mean...I will bring you some tea, if you so desire I...”

“You are very kind.” Yielia moved back towards the stairs. “May I see for myself that Riki is resting well?”

“Y...yes, of course. I’ll bring the tea up for you.”

“Thank you. May I ask one more thing?”

“Yes.”

“I cannot get used to the bedroom on the upper floor, there is so little light and it is so very dark.”

“Ah, yes it used to be a pet room, so...”

“Could I possibly sleep in the room behind the kitchen then? I looked in on it earlier, please do forgive me, I was drawn by the light inside.”

The Furniture bedroom did have larger windows, where the pet room only had the one small one that was added when it became a place for Cal to sleep and Riki to study. “You...you wish to sleep there?”

“If there is no objection.”

The relief that surged through Cal was palatable and he wondered for a moment if she had some sort of ability to read his mind? If so, was that why she had comforted him? Could she read his thoughts even now?

“Master Iason advised that I should sleep there,” he hedged.

“Would it not be more prudent to be closer to Ma...Riki so you may better care for him?”

“Yes, that would make more sense.”

“It is settled.” She smiled. “I shall go and check on him and have my tea when it is brought, and then I will retire to the room downstairs to sleep. Will you wake me in a few hours and I shall relieve you so you may rest? I am sure together we will have Maku healthy in no time.”

Cal nodded before he could stop himself. “Okay.” He watched her disappear up the stairs then he turned and headed into the kitchen, his step just a little bit lighter than it had been.

Chapter 16

Summary for the Chapter:

Raoul tracks down Katze and makes him an offer he can't resist

CONTAINS A FLASHBACK THAT DEALS WITH CHILD RAPE-
DO NOT READ IF THIS DISTURBS YOU!!!! YOU HAVE BEEN
WARNED.

Raoul buzzed Katze's apartment for admittance and was annoyed when his request went unanswered. He knew the black-market dealer was home because his spies had advised him that their target had returned to the residence just after sunrise that morning. Katze must have been truly tired, for he had continuously managed to shake off the tail up until this point. The former Furniture had been avoiding Raoul and ignoring his messages the last few days, a situation that Raoul was determined to rectify.

It was now only two hours after sunrise, and while the polite thing to do would be to allow the Human time to sleep, Raoul could not risk a rested and alert Katze to escape from his men again so he showed up at this ungodly hour to corner him.

He buzzed again, then held his finger to the chime, knowing it would continue to ring until it was answered. After another minute or so the viewer at the side of the door blinked on an angry, bleary eyed red-head glared at him.

"What the fu..." Katze squinted. "Raoul? Do you *know* what time it is?"

"I do. Open the door."

"I've been awake since the day before yesterday, give me a break here!"

"Open the door, Katze, or I will override the code and come in anyway."

Raoul found delight in watching Katze run a frustrated hand through his already sleep-tossed hair. The door locks released and the Blondie stepped inside. He spotted multiple cameras and motion detectors discretely placed around the hallway and even along the stairs leading up to the main apartments, although they were well placed and disguised so he doubted most others would.

Climbing the stairs, a door to his right opened a crack and a young boy peered out suspiciously. The child's half hidden face revealed a large, ridged nose, wide eyes and a face covered with spiky blue fur.

"Who are you?" the boy demanded.

"Raoul Am, a Blondie of Tanagura. Who are *you*?"

"Kleen, go back to bed before your father wakes up and finds you out of it."

Raoul turned to his right and found Katze standing in the doorway of the adjacent apartment in a pair of old sleep pants, his feet and chest bare.

"Is he your friend, Kat?"

"No, but he's not my enemy." Katze's gaze softened. "I'm fine, kid. Go back to sleep or your dad will be all over me."

"Pawm's hibernating. He won't be awake for at least another week."

"And neither should you be, now go back to bed or you'll screw up your cycle!"

Kleen returned his gaze to Raoul, raised two thick, furry fingers to his dark eyes then pointed them outwards. "I got my eyes on you, Raoul Am of Tanagura," he said before he quickly closed the door and several distinct locks slide into place behind it.

"Why do you inhabit the same building as a Browel?"

"His father owns the building and the rent is cheap."

Raoul said as he stepped into Katze's small apartment. "How can you stand the stench?"

"They're cleaner than most Humans I know."

"Still, their hair gets into everything."

Raoul glanced around the simple single-occupant apartment, but found very little of interest. The pale grey walls appeared sturdy and were completely free of adornment, imitating a stark, bleak atmosphere that would be better suited to a medical facility or warehouse than one's home dwelling.

A worn sofa in the center of the small room was the only place to sit and it faced an aged entertainment unit, which held a single vid-screen and a well-used music box with a few discs beside it. Across from the unit and against the far wall was a single, standard box bed, the plain black blanket and white sheets thoroughly rumpled, no doubt from where Katze had been attempting to sleep.

Opposite the living area was a corner kitchenet that housed a small refrigeration chest and a built in food processor, and above that a single shelf that held one plate and bowl, one cup and glass and a single set of utensils stacked atop one another, a box of dried breakfast food and two kitchen towels.

Raoul found the sheer unambiguous of the place appalling. "*This* is where you live? Doesn't Iason pay you enough to get a decent dwelling?"

"This is all I need."

Katze didn't bother to explain that he had another apartment elsewhere and several other 'hidey holes' in different cities. The apartment where he let Cal stay with him was his main apartment close to his office in Apathia, but because he knew that someone had been following him recently he decided to return to this one instead.

"What do you need, Raoul?"

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

“I’ve trying to recoup lost time while I was on Avalon. People got a little greedy and a lot stupid while I was away and now I have to clean up the mess. I haven’t slept for almost two days and you are interrupting that, so please tell me what is so damn important that you felt the need to come here?”

“Direct and to the point, as always.” Raoul glanced cautiously at the small sofa, then at the bed, Gingerly he settled on simple, uncomfortable looking sofa. “Courtesy calls for you to offer me a beverage.”

“I don’t have any.” Too tired to remain standing, but unwilling to sit next to the presumptuous Blondie, Katze dropped down and sat cross-legged on the bare floor. “I haven’t had time to shop.”

“Yes, I can see you have been busy and will no doubt continue to be. I also suspect that you will continue to avoid scheduling time for me, and I must insist that you do.”

“Look, I told Iason I would and I will, when I have time...”

“It has been almost a week since that promise was made and yet you continue to avoid me. I am not used to such behavior, Katze, so naturally I felt the need to rectify it.”

“I’m not avoiding you, I just...”

“Have you dealt with what needed to be dealt with?”

“Mostly but there are still a few...”

“I believe that Iason suggested that you take a vacation once you were finished.”

“I’m not finished. I’m trying to tell you that there is still...”

Raoul pulled a disc out of his pocket and tossed it to Katze.

“What’s this?”

“Do you not even have a proper console in this place?”

Glaring at him, Raoul rose and moved to the kitchen area. He pressed his hand against a section of wall and a panel slid open to reveal six small monitors and a mini console. Sliding the disc into the information slot, Katze brought up the files and as he started to read and stared at the photo’s that contained a younger version of himself as he was pulled back into the past.

He lay on his back, naked against the filthy mattress as a stranger fucked him, while his father straddled his chest and shoved a dirty cock in his mouth. He responded the way he had been trained to, the way that they wanted him too, while his emotions remained locked behind a wall of hate and disgust. His father was a gambler, and this was how he paid his debts, by lending out his son’s body for sex.

Finally, both men were done and he was released, covered in bite marks, semen and sweat. He turned his head and watched as the debt collector dressed and shook his father’s hand, even as his hand slid to the pocket in the mattress beneath him, that he had hollowed out weeks earlier.

‘Why you still lyin’ there?’ his father sneered. ‘You want more? You ain’t done yet. You want Daddy to make you squeal, boy?’

‘Yeah,’ he returned quietly and smiled, for the first time in years, at the bastard who had spawned him. ‘Make me squeal.’

The man’s eyes lit with renewed vigour as he returned to the bed. “Such a slut, you are. Just like your mother.”

‘Hmmmm,’ Katze murmured, locking eyes with his father as the man climbed atop him once more. ‘I loved you once.’

His father paused, dumbfounded. ‘Huh? Where’d that come...Urrgggg!’

He plunged the blade into his father's heart and turned it, watching intently as the bastard's face twisted in shock and agony, then the grey eyes he hated so much grew dark with the touch of death. Shoving the heavier man off of him, he then turned the blade on himself, slicing shallow wounds into his arms, his torso and legs.

He couldn't feel the pain of the blade, perhaps all the beatings and punishments he had taken over the years had deadened his physical senses as well as his emotional ones. The new injuries were a bright contrast to the faded scars of his past. Crawling across the hard, concrete floor, leaving a trail of his own blood from the soiled mattress to the wall, he managed to lever himself up and hit the alert button.

A voice came over the system. 'Please state the nature of your emergency.'

'Help me,' he cried as he struggled to remain conscious. 'He...he's gonna kill me. Help me.'

'A unit has been dispatched to your location, please stand by.'

He let himself fall flat against the floor, wondering if he had cut himself too deeply with the knife as the slice across his wrist was gushing out and making him feel light-headed. Dazed as the cold hand of shock began to seep into his body, he turned his head toward the face-down body of the man who had created him. A pool of blood formed beneath the body and slowly crept outwards as if trying to reach towards him. Die, you bastard, he thought bitterly. Perhaps they would both die? Did it matter, he wondered as his eyes drifted closed. No, it didn't because even death was better than this.

The next memory he had was waking up in the hospital. His wounds had been wrapped and treated and a nurse was talking to a man with long green hair.

'It looks like self-defense,' the woman said. 'There is evidence of multiple attacks of sodomy and the man and child were both naked. Looks like the man flew into a rage during the sexual act and tried to kill the child. The

child must have managed to get the blade from the man and stabbed him in the heart.'

'That is your best estimate?'

'Yes, based on what the sentries found at the scene and the severity of the wounds.'

'What will happen to him now?'

'He'll be sent to Guardian in Ceres.' The woman looked back and the boy closed his eyes to feign sleep. 'A shame. He managed to grow up outside of the slums, but that's where he will be ending up.'

'Who is he? Was the man the child's legal guardian?'

'The man is registered as a welder with the city, but there is nothing on record of the child. Could be his, could be an orphan he grabbed off the street. Without documentation and proper registration there is no way to confirm.'

'How old is he?'

'The doctor's estimate him to be ten years old. According to his exams the child has suffered multiple past injuries and broken bones and fractures, but has never been to a health center. I am surprised that they healed as well as they did without any medical assistance.'

'A waste.'

"Why?"

'He is pretty enough to be a pet, but I do not believe he would be a good one with such a history. He is also obviously strong willed, a survivor and would make good Furniture, but he is too old.'

The boy's eyes flew open. 'I'm not!' he cried and tried to sit up, as the nurse rushed over to him. 'Please, sir, I can be Furniture! I'll be good Furniture. I promise!'

‘Oh? What makes you think so?’ The Emerald walked up to him, intrigued. ‘Do not lie to me, I will know right away and I will have you shipped to Ceres immediately.’

‘I’m strong and I’m smart too. I can remember almost anything I read only once. My father wouldn’t let me go to school, but I would steal books sometimes and...’

‘You admit that you are a thief?’

The boy flushed and let the nurse push him back down. ‘S...sometimes, Sir. But just for f...food and...and sometimes books.’

‘Did your father not feed you or send you to school?’

‘N...no, Sir. My mother left when I was four and...and my father...he kept me home after that because he said I had to take up my mother’s duties. He gave me cheese and bread every few days or so I wouldn’t faint while...while...’

‘Those duties included fornicating with your father?’

‘And...and his friends, sir.’

‘Friends?’ the nurse asked.

‘He...he owed them credits and so...so he said it was to earn my keep.’

The Elite studied him quietly. ‘Do you understand what becoming Furniture entails?’

The boy shook his head.

‘You would be entering a life of servitude, until such a time that your master deems you unnecessary at which point you may be sold to an off worlder or even terminated.’

‘But only if I’m deemed unnecessary, right?’

‘That is correct.’

‘Then I won’t ever be unnecessary! I’ll work hard, harder than any other Furniture and I’d do everything my Master asks of me. I’ll make him want me with him forever!’

‘You have such confidence to say such things? You, a mere Human who has just killed his own father?’

The boy pushed the nurse away and sat up, despite the pain it caused him. ‘It’s kill or be killed, everyone knows that. I killed my father because he was trying to kill me. I’ll do what I have to do, to whoever I have to if it means getting the job done. I will never be a disappointment to my new Master.’

“Child, you don’t know what you’re saying.” The nurse insisted. “Part of the process for becoming Furniture is castration. Do you understand what that is?”

‘No. What is it?’

‘They cut off your genitals and remove any and all reproductive organs. It is a traumatic experience which is why it is only performed on the very young, before they can fully understand the purpose of these organs. You have had sex multiple times, you have felt pleasure and...’

‘I felt no pleasure!’ the boy insisted. ‘I never wanted that and I don’t ever want it again.’ He whipped back the sheet exposing himself. ‘Cut it off! Take all of it!’ He started pounding his fists on his tiny penis, ignoring the pain. ‘It makes people mad, makes them sick. I don’t want it! I don’t want it!’

The Emerald stopped the assault by catching the boy’s wrists and stared directly into eyes wild with desperation. ‘Very well,’ he decided. ‘I will see it done.’

‘Sir!’ the nurse cried again. ‘He is too old and he is still a witness to an investigation!’

“I own this hospital.” The Emerald rose. ‘Do you dare challenge me?’

‘N...No sir.’

‘Speak of this to no one.’ He gathered the sheet around the young boy then pulled him into his arms. ‘If you do, I will have you erased, do you understand?’

The nurse nodded quickly and the boy turned and watched her as they stepped out of the room and headed down a pale green corridor. No one stopped them or questioned them, although several people seemed to pause and bow their heads respectively as they passed.

‘My name is Jaden Nu, and I am an Emerald of Tanagura. What shall I call you?’

‘Boy,’ the boy returned as they stepped through a portal field and into a garage that housed multiple vehicles. He had never seen such things close up!

‘Boy?’

He watched a man open the back door of a luxury air-car and, after glancing at Jaden he climbed inside. The Elite settled next to him and waved the driver in front to drive.

‘That’s all my father ever called me.’

“I see. Well, we shall come up with a new name for you then.”

‘Okay.’ He moved onto his knees, despite the pain it caused him and watched diligently as they drove away from the hospital, and then out of his neighborhood. He would have a name soon, a real name, and he would never have to see his father again. He didn’t care that they would take away his parts, he hated that part of himself because that was what his father had loved and lusted over. Now he would have a new place and a job, one he would work very hard in to stay needed. He decided then that the child he was had died with his father, and he buried him way down deep inside of himself.

Raoul watched Katze's face pale so drastically it almost appeared he was looking at an X-ray of the man. Katze remained impossibly still, like a statue and just when Raoul made the decision to rise and go to him, Katze's face flushed with anger and he spun around.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded.

He had a mind and skill for computers and while Jaden had buried most of his past, there was always trails that could be followed. Therefore, once he had managed significant and proper access he made sure that the trails would lead to nowhere as well. It shouldn't have been possible for anyone to find a record of him before he became Furniture other than the basic information of a fake registration number and city that Jaden had created.

He had made good on his promise and quickly rose in the ranks of Furniture. His excellence and dependability did not go unnoticed and when Jaden was posted to an off-planet assignment that outlawed any sort of slavery or servitude, Katze was purchased by Iason Mink, which had been the highest position that could be reached as Furniture.

Working for Iason was also a learning experience and he soon became aware that knowledge was power. As he never intended to be powerless again, or to ever be in a situation like the one from his childhood, he used his talents and technical skills to glean certain classified information about Eos, the Blondies and Tanagura.

It was during his third intrusion into the system that Iason uncovered what he had done and had sliced the whip across his face as punishment, creating the memorable scar on his cheek. Jaden had arranged for the other scars on his body to be removed, so he would be a more perfect Furniture, with the exception of the self-inflicted one on his left wrist which had been too deep to heal completely. Katze had been sure he would be terminated when Iason stumbled upon his crime, and had not been aware that Iason had been observing and calculating his Furniture's remarkable and useful abilities. This was when Katze became Iason right hand for the underworld.

"It took some time and resources," Raoul admitted. "You did very well in burying it, but the wonderful thing about computers is that even if you erase

all evidence, there is always a trail somewhere, a thread that can be pulled, if you are patient and intelligent enough.”

“You're wrong.” Katze had made certain there could be no trace of anything left in the system. “Tell me where you got your information.”

“I don't believe I will.” Raoul patted the cushion beside him, indicating he wanted Katze join him. “You *will* sit.”

Katze's eyes narrowed and he moved to the opposite arm of the sofa.

“No. I wish for you to sit beside me.”

After a moment's hesitation, Katze complied. He sat stiffly by the Elite and folded his hands into his lap. “What do you want?”

“Only to talk.”

“I'm not talking about that!”

“No, I have no interest in your past,” Raoul lied because he did have a keen interest in what made Katze the man he was, although he could glean quite a bit from the information he had uncovered. He now understood Katze's bizarre reaction at being kissed, and so he had reformulated his plan. There was, of course, much more he wanted to learn, and he would, after he had gained the Furniture's trust.

Katze glared at him. “Then....why dig it up?”

“To get your attention.”

Katze stared at Raoul, confused. What was the Blondie up to? Did he intend to tell Iason about the fact that he had murdered his father and had become Furniture under false pretenses, circumventing the age law and hiding his true identity? Did Raoul intend to shame him somehow into being part of his experiments?

“I won't be your lab rat,” he stated and rose abruptly. “You can do what you want with the information, I really don't care, I would simply like to know

where I made a mistake so I can be sure not to repeat it in the future.”

“Aren't you worried I will tell Iason?”

“It has nothing to do with Iason, or how I perform my job for him, so it would be illogical to do so.”

Iason had believed that Katze had become Furniture at the age of six, as all others did, and to date it was the only lie he had actually told his Master. Still, it was a lie and while it may not be enough for Iason to terminate him, Iason would consider it a betrayal of their trust and he would be disappointed in Katze. Termination would be better than that, in Katze's mind.

“True,” Raoul agreed. “Although, Humans are rarely logical, but I suspect that you would prefer he not know about this small, sordid incident.”

“You think that insignificant blip is of any importance to him?” Katze rose to his feet again. “I've done far worse and on his order.” Iason must not know about his past, but nor could he show any weakness to Raoul. “You'd only be wasting his time and yours.”

Raoul rose and while he did not tower over Katze, he was tall enough that he could easily look down at him. “You're lying,” he stated simply and grabbed Katze's wrist with a gloved hand. “Your heart rate has increased twice since I first arrived and there is a trail of sweat leading from the back of your neck and down your throat. This does affect you and you worry that it will affect how Iason sees you.”

Katze held Raoul's gaze for several, hard, tense moments. “What do you *want*?”

“Will you agree to anything I ask?”

“I won't be part of an experiment. I won't let you use me as a pet!”

“I have far higher criteria for my experiments and my pets, you do not qualify.” And after reading Katze's file Raoul realized that it would be

detrimental to the Human to continue with his original plan.

“Then what?” What could Raoul possibly want with him? While he tried not to be overtly rude to the Blondie, they did not get on all that well. Raoul was like oil and Katze water. They had nothing in common and he knew very little about science or pets, so how could he be of any use?

“Sit.” Raoul said again and tugged Katze back towards the sofa, when Katze remained stiff and unyielding, he added. “Please.”

With a barely contained hiss of displeasure, Katze sat beside Raoul once more. “Tell me what you want from me.”

“I want a companion.”

Katze blinked. “Ex...excuse me?”

“A friend. A companion. Someone to talk with, drink with, share ideas with. That sort of thing.”

“Isn't Iason your friend?”

“Yes, of course, but he has no interest in what I do and much of his time is taken up with the running of the Syndicate and that damn pet of his.”

“The other Elites, then? Surely you have more in common....”

“Do you not even have wine?”

Katze swallowed a growl, stood and walked over to the kitchenette. He grabbed his single glass down from the shelf, opened a cupboard that contained his one bottle of liquor, as he had not been to this place for a while so there were few supplies. He poured a generous helping into the glass, walked back and handed it to Raoul.

“It's whisky,” he said as he settled back on the sofa. “Raoul, if this is some kind of joke...”

“They don't like me.”

Katze raised an eyebrow. "Who doesn't *like* you?"

"My brethren. They are jealous of the fact that I am close to Iason, and frightened of my knowledge and experiments. Well, perhaps frightened is not the right word, as they are more than eager to try my new pets, but they find what I do, distasteful."

Katze couldn't argue with their opinion. "They like the result but not the specifics it takes to get there."

"Yes, exactly!" Raoul smiled pleased. "They are perfectly polite to me in the day to day tedium, but they never include me in anything that they do together. I am invited to pet parties and the like only through mass invitation or social propriety or political gain. In essence, they don't trust me."

"I don't trust you either."

Raoul's lips quirked. "Don't you?"

"Trust is a commodity that is hard to come by in my business. I will respect your status as a Blondie, I promised Iason that, but I can't afford to trust you, Raoul."

Raoul leaned forward, set his half empty glass on the table and turned towards Katze. "That will make becoming my friend difficult."

"I don't want to be your friend."

"Because you do not trust me?"

"Because I do not like you," Katze returned honestly. "And in my business making friends is not a possibility, unless they can do something for you."

"I see." Raoul clasped his hands together over his knees. "And if I had something you wanted, you might reconsider my offer?"

"You don't have anything I want, and even if you did, we'd only be 'friends' for as long as I could use what you have and then I'd have no more

dealings with you.”

Raoul studied Katze quietly, then nodded. “I applaud your honesty and find your mercenary heart appealing.”

“Good for you.” Katze retorted. “Are we done now?”

“No. I still require your time and attention.”

“What’s the point?” Katze’s eyes felt as if someone had thrown sand in them and he barely stifled a yawn. “Nothing will come of it. I can’t be your friend. I can’t be anyone’s friend.”

“Are you not a friend to Riki?”

“No. Riki and I have a history through Iason, but we’re not friends.”

“What are you then?”

“I’m the guy Iason pays to keep an eye on Riki occasionally and report back if there is trouble.”

“Is that how Riki sees your relationship?”

“We don’t have a relationship! Riki understands this!”

Raoul studied Katze for a long moment. “Cal then. You cannot tell me you do not have a certain affection for that boy?”

“As a former Furniture only.”

“You are saying there is no one, not a single person, or being that you consider your friend, or that you are truly close to and comfortable with?”

Katze thought of how he wept at Dana Bahn, when he believed Iason had died. He had known that Riki had also died and had been saddened by it, but it was losing Iason that had caused him to experience true grief. “That is what I am saying.”

“Excellent. Then I should have no trouble filling that obvious void in your life.”

Katze gaped at him. “What void? There is no void! I don’t have a void!”

“I am not asking for your undying affection, Katze, merely your time. How you feel about me otherwise should not affect the outcome.”

“Then, why do it? You know I won’t really be your friend so...”

“I have no one else,” Raoul returned simply.

“So...you're saying what exactly? That you’re lonely?”

“Don't be an idiot, of course I am not.”

“Then I just don't get what you're saying. Why would you want to be fri...”
Damn it, Katze couldn’t quite stifle a second yawn quite as well. “Friends with me when...”

“Because you aren't afraid of me, Katze. You have an ingrained respect for me of course, because I am a Blondie, but that does not stop you from being honest with me. No one else ever is. They hide their true feelings behind the fear that they have of me.” Raoul sat back again. “It will be worse now that I have had to investigate several of them. I understand that they cannot trust me, because I am Jupiter’s tool and so I must do as She requests, even if it is an infringement on their privacy. You are not chained by such things. I believe that the things I tell you will remain in your confidence, because I know that you have already given such trust to Iason.”

“That doesn’t mean I’ll owe you the same favor.”

Raoul stood and walked to the wall console to remove the disc he had brought with him. “True, but you did say that if I had something useful for you, you would consider it.” He dropped the disc on the coffee table. “I have properly purged all records of you from the system. This is the last of it.”

Katze glanced at the disc. then looked up at Raoul. “Define all.”

“Everything from before you became a Furniture and everything after it.”

Katze slowly rose to his feet. “Everything?”

“Even your Furniture registration.”

Katze’s eyes widened. How was that possible? “I...Iason...”

“I already received approval from Iason and before you ask he did not ask me to go into details about why I should do such a thing. He is often concerned for your safety regarding the secrets you keep for him, so I suggested that such a maneuver would only improve the protection of yourself and the secrets you keep. You are now only known as number 456GYT, which is necessary so that you can maintain a credit account or order transports or supplies. Beyond that, you are a shadow with no past or future, only a present. You can even change your name, if you like.”

Such freedom was unheard of on *Amoi* and Katze wasn’t quite sure how to react. Technically, with no record of himself in any of the databases, he could order a transport and fly away anywhere, never to return. “How do you know I won’t cut and run?”

“Because you are loyal to Iason.”

That was true, Katze would never even consider leaving Iason, plus he enjoyed what he did and he made a good living at it. Where else could he apply the skills he had nurtured here? “To Iason, yes, but I have no such loyalty to you. I’m not a Mongrel, I don’t feel the need to repay a debt the way they do, so I can still decline *your* offer.”

“True, but Mongrel or not, you are an honorable man, when you choose to be.”

“I’m not honorable at all.”

Raoul actually smiled. “Do you not feel what you did for Cal was honorable? How you sheltered him when Iason and the pet first returned, and how you comforted him after his ordeal?”

“How I told Iason everything after telling Cal I wouldn’t!”

“You never gave your word as I did so he will not hold it against you, as you did it for his own well being.” Raoul touched Katze’s shoulder. “I could force you to do this, as I said I have Iason’s permission, but I am offering an exchange instead. You required something useful in return for your time. I have given you that. Will you continue to deny me?”

Katze lowered his eyes to the disc on the table again. He didn’t want to do this, he felt uncomfortable around Raoul and it had nothing to do with being afraid of him. It was something...else. Still, the gift of having such autonomy was almost inconceivable for him. He used many different names with his contacts and suppliers, only people like Iason and Riki even knew him as Katze. With his records wiped, he would never have to fear someone doing a background check or trying to find something on him to use against Iason.

“I’d just have to sit and listen to you talk?” he asked, warily.

“Well, I would hope you would also talk back, that we might have a conversation of sorts. I won’t ask you about your work, however you may find that I also have a wide variety of contacts that might be of assistance to you there as well.”

“How often?”

“I haven’t decided, I suppose whenever I feel the urge for company.”

“I can’t be at your beck and call, Raoul.”

“Nor do I expect you to. I am not an impatient child, Katze, however if I suggest dinner now and then, or perhaps just a break, I would appreciate it if you could fit it into your schedule rather than devoting your time and energy to avoiding me.”

Katze sat back down on the sofa, found his vision was starting to blur. He was exhausted, how could he possibly consider this or even have the capacity to think right now? But if he didn’t give Raoul an answer then the

Blondie would just force him, as he threatened to do. “Fine. Give me another few days then. I have some loose ends to tie up and then Iason wants me to take a break, but I can...free up some time after that.”

“Excellent.” Raoul rose. “Let’s have a toast to seal the agreement.” He moved over to where he saw Katze take out the whisky, refilled his glass and then poured some of the liquor into the single cup Katze had on the shelf. “I’m not unreasonable, so I will even give you two weeks, so you may take your break from work without worry. After all, friends compromise, do they not?” He picked up the glass and cup and turned back “Depending on how you are interested in spending your time off I can even...” He stopped at the end of the sofa and stared at the stoic black-market dealer who had fallen asleep sitting up. Slowly he smiled. “Well, this is awkward. Not only are you placing yourself at my mercy, where I could do any number of lascivious things to you, but you have left the door to your apartment unsecured and someone could come in and murder you in your sleep.”

Raoul set the drinks down and stepped closer to peer down at Katze, noticing that sleep shaved off at least ten years from the man’s face. “Hmmm, does this perhaps mean you do trust me?” He smiled at the thought and carefully slid his arms under Katze’s limp form.

The poor man must truly be exhausted for he didn’t budge. The temptation to undress Katze and do a thorough physical was difficult to suppress, he was sure he could learn any manner of things from an exam that Katze would never allow willingly. However, if he truly wished to begin this new relationship he would have to behave himself, to an extent.

He carefully lay Katze down on the narrow bed and covered him up with the thin blanket and sheet. “There you are, *friend*,” he murmured as he tucked the blanket around Katze. “Snug as a bug in a rug,” he paused. Where did that saying even come from, why would anyone allow bugs to live inside the house? Humans were such an odd lot sometimes.

He suppressed the urge to snoop around, though he was reasonably sure there would be little to find in the one room apartment, then he returned to the table to polish off both drinks. “Hmm...tasty.” He set the dishes in the

sink then moved to the open console and monitors. “He must have a way of setting some sort of security when he leaves, let’s see then.” After just a few seconds Raoul figured out the procedure. “A very good system, not one anyone less brilliant than myself could easily bypass, but there is room for improvement.” He set the locks to engage thirty seconds after he left, then he stepped out and closed the door.

Katze opened one eye as he heard the warning ‘Security Locks Engaged’ then rose from the bed and walked over to the table that held the disc. While he had agreed to Raoul’s offer, he was already considering a way to get out of it. He had decided to test the Blondie’s intentions by pretending to fall asleep, only he had been so tired that he actually did fall asleep. He woke up to the sound of Raoul tinkering with his console. Deciding it was better to maintain the lie, and not suffer through more endless and confusing chatter, he maintained a façade of sleep until he heard the locks engage.

Picking up the disc, he dropped it into his sink and retrieved a hand held, and very illegal, disintegrator gun that was taped under the lower counter. He destroyed the file, studied the slight scorch marks in the sink from the gun, and he ran the water to wash it away.

He put the weapon back in its place then moved to the console again and added his three other layers of security, engaging camera’s motions sensors and a set of humming laser spikes that rose from the floor just inside the door; anyone coming through without his knowledge would meet a quick end.

With a sigh, he poured himself the last of his whisky, drank it down with two pain tablets and stumbled back to bed, secure that he could now sleep.

Chapter 17

Summary for the Chapter:

Guy is exhausted and Shiao is Sated- What next?

Shiao lay quietly and watched the soft colors of the sunrise flow through the balcony, bathing Guy in golds and magentas. The mongrel was sleeping deeply, no doubt exhausted by their nearly two days of rigorous sex. He'd worried that he had taken advantage, gone too far for too long, but Guy was true to his promise; he'd never used his safe word.

Shiao had waited for the rage to come, or the all-consuming lust that had overtaken him before and had resulted in a woman's death, but it never did. Granted, it still took him several hours to feel sated, but Guy never pushed him away, never asked him to stop or slow down after that first time. Eventually Guy passed out from exhaustion, he was a mere Human after all, and Shiao allowed him to sleep all he wanted, but the moment Guy was awake it began again.

The mongrel had taken everything Shiao had given him without complaint and had responded beautifully. Guy's cries of pleasure were now so firmly etched in his memory that he could recall them will, which may be all he would be left with if Guy woke up angry for molesting him so thoroughly over the last couple of days.

Shiao caressed Guy's bare shoulder and tried to put a name to this new feeling he was experiencing. He had been content with his pet, felt comfortable and rewarded with Terian, but this feeling was different. This feeling was more and he did not know how to categorize it. He had crossed the line again, committed a sin, again, but he was experiencing none of the pain or confusion as he had last time, or the regret.

He had not hurt Guy; well there were a few bruises on the mongrel, but there was no blood and the Human was *still* alive. He wondered, if the woman had been more agreeable, more cooperative, would he have been

able to feel like this instead, or would he still have lost control and caused her death?

Well, there was no turning back the past, one simply must learn to live through it. Throwing back the covers, he silently rose and headed for his room to take a shower and dress. When he returned, Guy still had not moved and a moment of fear sparked inside him; the mongrel had been asleep nearly seven hours since their last session.

Moving quickly across the room, he crouched and checked Guy's pulse, relieved to find it strong and steady. Nodding in approval, he pulled the covers over his friend then left the room again.

Guy finally awoke, two hours later, started to move and groaned. Where was he? What day was it? "Fuck me," he whispered as pain throbbed through his body.

"I did, multiple times."

Guy managed to lift his head to look at Shiao standing in the doorway. "Motherfucker." His head dropped back onto the pillow in defeat. Man! Even his hair hurt!

What was he thinking doing it with an Elite, and one with such crazy enthusiasm! He had been penetrated multiple times, sometimes slowly, sometimes hard and fast, but most were just a blur now, except for their very last one. The last time Shiao had taken him he developed an understand of what it was like to be screwed at the speed of sound. He hadn't thought it possible to move that fast, let alone do it while inside another person. It had felt beyond incredible, and he'd reached orgasm multiple times during it, but he'd been afraid that his ass cheeks might sparked and catch on fire!

This last thought caused his ass to automatically tighten and he groaned again in pain.

Shiao moved to stand beside the bed. "Are you angry with me."

“No.” Guy wasn’t angry, not really. Despite the aches and pains accumulated, the experience with Shiao had been worth it, but he was in pain and so he *was* grumpy. “Maybe.”

“I am truly sorry.”

“Yeah?” Guy managed to open one eyelid to glare at the Elite. “You owe me.”

“I do.”

“What are you gonna do about it?”

“Anything you wish me to do.”

Guy had a suspicion that Shiao wasn’t kidding, and he felt a flash of sympathy when he saw the guilt so evident on the android’s face. “Prove it,” he muttered and weakly lifted his arm towards the Onyx. “Carry me to the bath since you’ve incapacitated me.”

Hearing the obvious petulance in his friend’s voice, Shiao’s concern eased a little and he gently scooped the mongrel into his arms. “As it happens, I already have one prepared.”

“Fucking better be.” Guy rested his cheek against Shiao’s solid, comfortable chest. “Is it gonna be like that every time?”

Shiao stilted. Did that mean that Guy would be willing to participate in a repeat of last night’s activities? He had assumed this would be a onetime event. “I could try to be less vigorous if you wish to make another attempt.”

Attempt? No way could what they did over the course of two days be considered anything but a success! “Hmmm...maybe you can let me do *you* next time,” Guy murmured as they entered the bathroom and he felt Shiao stop moving. He lifted his head. “What?”

“I am aroused.”

Guy chuckled, uneasily. “Forget it!” He pointed to the steaming hot bath in front of them. “Bath. Now.”

“Very well.” Shiao took two steps and gently lowered Guy into the bath, then started to move away, only to have Guy catch his hand.

“Hey, where do you think you’re going?”

“I am giving you privacy.”

“Why?”

“Do you not desire it?”

“No.” Guy tugged on his hand. “Just because I said no sex right now, doesn’t mean we can’t share a bath. We always share a bath.”

“That was in a different context, Guy. If I get in with you now I may be unable to keep my hands to myself.”

“I’m not saying you have to, just keep that...” Guy pointed to Shiao’s groin. “Out of my ass. At least for a few days.”

Shiao considered the offer, then began to undress. “I make no promises,” he stated as he stepped into the bath, but stayed on his side, as was his norm unless Guy was washing him.

Logically he could still have declined as he’d had a shower earlier and there was little point in bathing twice, however he would not pass up the invitation. He needed to ascertain if he and Guy would be okay after this, if they could still be friends and if not, what could they be? What were they, even now?

Guy sighed. Closed his eyes, and sank lower in the bath, letting the heat penetrate his very sore muscles. He groaned again, this time in relief as Shiao activated the jets and the water bubbled and frothed around them. He gave himself over to it for a little while, then realized it was way to quiet and reluctantly opened his eyes and stared across at Shiao, who had not moved from his spot.

“What’s wrong?”

“I feel I should apologize again,” Shiao admitted.

“Why?”

“Because you are in pain and it is my due to my negligence.”

“I’m in pain because it’s been a really long time since I had sex, Shiao.” Guy had been using muscles he had forgotten that he had. “And even longer since I did a marathon of it.”

“Marathon?”

“Yeah, going over and over again, like we did.” Only Guy had only ever done that in hours not days.

“I was too rough with you.”

“I’m a big boy, I can handle it.”

“I did not wish to be,” Shiao admitted. “I wished to be gentle, to be careful, but I found once we started that I could not stop.” Perhaps he had lost control after all. Just because Guy had not died from his actions did not mean what he had done was right.

“Ah shit.” With great effort, Guy heaved himself onto his knees and slowly crawled over to Shiao, who’s green-eyed gaze watched cautiously. “Making me move when I’m in this kinda shape...” He turned and let himself fall slightly against Shiao, creating a large splash in the water. Again, with obvious effort, he caught both of Shiao’s arms and pulled them around him, then laid his head back against the android’s chest. “You were great, Shiao. It felt great. A little soreness or pain is no big deal, so put it out of your mind.”

“I believe that you are not seeing the situation clearly and are attempting only to make me feel better. You need not worry about my feelings, as I have none, and...”

Guy moved faster this time as he reached up and grabbed Shiao's hair with both his hands, pulling the Elite's head down so they could look at each other.

"Don't fucking lie to me, man."

"Lie? I am not lying..."

"You do have feelings! If you didn't then why would you feel bad about that woman after all this time? If you didn't feel anything for her you would have forgotten her..."

"I am incapable of forgetting anything, Guy. I am an android."

"Your brain's organic and if you really wanted to forget you could!"

"I really don't think I..."

"Then why are you worried?"

"Worried?"

"About me, about what we did. If you had no feelings, then it wouldn't matter to you!"

"It does matter, Guy. It matters very much."

Guy released Shiao and settled back against him. "Then you have feelings," he stated, ending the discussion.

Shiao remained still, even while Guy was pressed against him. He did not attempt to move his arms from the position that Guy had set them in. He did not delve further into conversation, simply because he was unsure what he could say. While he knew that he could feel emotions he tried very hard to bury them or ignore them. Admitting to anyone that he actually did feel could lead to his own destruction, couldn't it? Hadn't it before? Hadn't that always been the way? If he admitted that he could feel as much as a Human, he was either hunted by Jupiter or shunned by his own kind. He was feared by the Humans and resented by most everyone else. He could

not admit to having feelings, yet Guy had already seen proof that he did. Would the mongrel leave him now? Would he be left alone once again?

“Shiao?”

“Yes, Guy?”

“Are we okay?”

Hearing the uncertainty in his friend’s voice was surprising. He had not expected it, of himself naturally, he was a monster, but of worldly Human like Guy it a cause for concern. “We are if you wish it, Guy.”

Guy’s fingers played with Shiao’s in the water, linking their hands together, or comparing their lengths. “Tell me what you want.”

Shiao looked down at their hands, how much bigger his was to Guy’s, but then Guy’s hand was much bigger than the average Human’s as well. “I wish us to remain friends.”

“Just friends?”

“What more can we be?”

Guy shrugged and pulled one of Shiao’s hands against his chest, splaying the long fingers across it. “I don’t know.”

“You’re not a pet,” Shiao reminded as he felt the beat of Guy’s heart against his palm.

“You’re not a Blondie.”

“What then are we?”

Guy pulled both of Shiao’s hands together and linked them across his waist. “Something else, I guess.”

“Something good, or something bad?” Shiao asked, intrigued.

“Dunno.” Guy leaned his head back and closed his eyes as they started to tear up and he had no idea why. “My ass hurts.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You should be.”

“I am.”

Guy’s lips twitched into a half-way grin. “You owe me.”

“So you said.”

“How are you gonna pay up?”

Shiao pushed his hips slightly forward so that Guy would feel his obvious arousal.

“Not a chance in hell.”

The onyx almost smiled, for he knew that would be Guy’s answer. “Shall I ease your suffering, instead?”

“Yeah, how you gonna do that?”

“I can wash your body thoroughly,” Shiao allowed himself to caress Guy’s arm. “Then give you a full body massage.”

“Sounds great. And then what?”

“Then lunch?”

“I’m in no shape to cook!”

“I will cook for us.”

Guy glanced back at Shiao. “You can cook?”

“Yes.”

“Then why do you always make me cook?” Guy demanded, sitting up quickly only to wince at the pain it caused.

“You are better suited to it?”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means your meals taste better than the ones I can make.”

The irritation melted away from Guy and he settled back against the Onyx. “Oh.” He felt the warmth flare in his cheeks. “I guess that’s okay then.”

“Guy?”

“Hmmm?”

“Shall I wash you now?”

Guy had never had anyone wash him before, he found the idea kind of embarrassing, actually. “Um...why don’t I take care of that and you go start lunch?”

Shiao had already slipped some of the scented foam into his large hands and started to lather the mongrel’s back. “We had an agreement,” he reminded. “I owe you remember?”

Shiao’s soapy hands moved around to the front, gently washing and needing Guy’s stomach, then rib cage and then chest. Guy gasped slightly as the onyx applied pressure around his nipples.

“That’s not washing,” he murmured and felt himself harden in the water.

“Isn’t it?” Shiao asked as he applied more soap to his hands and nudged Guy to kneel and lean forward so he could wash the mongrel’s upper thighs and buttocks. “Is this not making you clean?”

“Y...yeah but...” Guy gripped the side of the tub as a smooth, wet finger slid closer to his entrance. “S...Shiao! I’m not up...”

“Now who is lying?” Shiao asked as he reached around and began to stroke Guy’s erection.

Guy found himself thrusting into the large, soapy hand before he could help it. “D...don’t put it in me...I can’t...”

“I won’t,” Shiao promised, understanding that Guy needed to recover in that area before they could enjoy that sort of thing again. “This is just for you.” His strokes grew faster and he was startled when Guy shoved his hand away. “Guy...”

Guy spun around in the bath and captured Shiao’s lips in a desperate kiss, even as he pulled the Onyx’s hand back to where it had been. Shiao returned the kiss eagerly as he continued to stroke Guy.

“Mmmm...like that,” Guy murmured against Shiao’s lips as his body continued to thrust into the android’s hand. “Ju...just like that...that...Ah...ahhhh....AHH!” The orgasm ripped through him, and for a few seconds seemed to blind him as well. He hadn’t thought he’d have anything left after the last two nights, but he was obviously mistaken.

He fell against Shiao’s chest and the onyx held him tenderly. “Fuck me,” he rasped as the water chased away all traces of his seed and sweat.

“Are you relaxed?” Shiao inquired and felt Guy’s grin against his skin.

“Was that my massage?”

“No, I promised you an all-over body massage, that was only one part.”

“If it’s gonna be like that I won’t make it past my hair.”

Shiao laughed, actually threw his head back and roared with it, startling Guy into splashing backwards into the water, stunned. The onyx rose and extended a hand to the mongrel who accepted and then a loud growl grew between them. Guy glanced down at his stomach in surprise.

“Let’s eat first, shall we?”

With a rueful smirk, Guy stepped out of the bath. “Yeah, food would be good.”

Chapter 18

Summary for the Chapter:

Riki has an Itch he can't scratch and Cal learns a secret

Notes for the Chapter:

thank you everyone SO SO much for all the fantastic comments! It means so very much to me, please keep them coming. Here is a bit of Riki and Iason 'smut' for those that have been requesting it.

Iason entered his condo to the sound of Riki barking for Cal. He lifted an eyebrow as the young man appeared before him and accepted his cloak.

“What’s wrong with him now?” he demanded as he stepped down into the living area.

It had been three days since Riki had contracted a child-hood illness from Avalon. The first two days he had been feverish and ill with stomach cramps, but had managed to sleep through most of it. Now the ‘spots’ that were part of the disease had spread to his arms, legs and back; he had no doubt that Riki was in agony. Iason had tried to be home as often as he could, but he simply had too much work and could only manage a few hours a day.

“He keeps scratching, Sir, so I am afraid that we were forced to take drastic measures.”

“Oh?” Iason’s eyebrow rose and he headed for the stairs, followed closely by Cal. The boy seemed a little better than when he had first arrived, however he was still pale and far too thin. “Have you eaten today?”

“Sir?”

Cal appeared taken back by the question and missed a step, in surprise. This alone proved to Iason that the former Furniture was not his usual self.

“You have lost weight, it does not suit you. Gain it back or I shall be very annoyed.”

“Y...yes, Sir.”

Cal admittedly had been kept quite busy with Riki's illness, enough that it kept his mind off his issues. Yet even as he had prepared meals for Yielia and some broth for Riki, he had been unable to keep his own food down. Every time he took a bite of anything, regardless of what it was he ended up throwing it up. Which reminded him of a question he'd been meaning to ask his master.

“Sir, may I ask...” His words drifted off as they reached the second floor and Iason turned to him.

“Yes?”

“I have been preparing meals and...and keeping the house as you have requested, however, I...” Cal started to sweat and hated himself for it.

“Spit it out, Cal.” Iason disliked seeing the boy so hesitant. He wished that he had Bean in front of him now for he would enjoy beating that Furniture into a useless pulp.

“May I have permission to reorganize the kitchen, Sir, so it is easier to find things?”

“Is there any reason why you should not be permitted to do so?”

Cal's eyes remained lowered, his hands clasped behind his back. “I thought...well, if Bean was returning, Sir, it would all have to be switched back and so...”

Iason started to drop his hand on Cal's shoulder, then carefully pulled it back and wondered when had he developed the inclination to comfort? Scowling he said. “Bean will not be returning. The house is yours while Riki is ill.”

Cal nodded. "Thank you, Sir." Only while Riki was ill? Where would he go after that?

Iason stepped into their room, while Cal remained at the doorway. Riki's hands were cuffed to the bedpost. "What's this?"

Riki spotted him and glared. "Tell him to take them off!"

"Why have they been put on?"

Yiela came out of the washroom with a towel to wipe up the spilled drink Riki had kicked from her hand when she had entered. "One cannot scratch what one cannot reach," she replied kindly.

"Ah, I see." Iason moved past her and settled onto the bed next to his pet, no, his consort. He had been fielding questions and comments the last few days from several people in regards to the change in Riki's title and he was frankly quite sick of it. "You were misbehaving."

"I won't scratch!" Riki cried. "Just take these fucking things off!"

"You promised that before," Cal advised quietly. "And the moment we left the room you started scratching."

"Indeed." Yiela rose from the floor with the empty glass and now wet towel. She smiled as she said. "You cannot be trusted, Maku."

"Come on!" Riki turned his gaze to Iason and whispered. "They're driving me crazy! Take them off!"

"Will you promise not to scratch?"

"Yes!"

Iason held Riki's desperate gaze and shook his head. "I don't believe you, either. However, I have an alternative." He glanced at the other two. "Leave us."

They nodded and stepped out as Iason stood and removed his outer tunic, leaving him in a sleeveless vest. “This reminds me of our first days together,” he said as he removed his boots and climbed back onto the bed. “I cannot deny the sight of you bound is highly arousing.”

Riki’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “Don’t even think about it!”

“It will take your mind off your itching, will it not?”

“No, it won’t!”

Riki tried to pull away as Iason pulled down the covers and exposed him in all his naked glory. The salve that Yielia had requested from Avalon had been delivered yesterday and he advised that only Cal may administer it. It left no traces or discoloration on Riki’s body, beyond a slight minty odor.

“Iason, please...please take them off!”

Iason leaned over Riki. “Why?” He caressed Riki’s cheek. “And remember what happens if you lie to me.”

Riki whimpered. “To scratch,” he admitted. “I have to scratch!” He arched his body towards Iason’s for skin on skin contact in an attempt to find relief. “I can’t take it!”

Although his broken ribs were mostly healed, thanks to the wand that both the doctor and Cal had used on them, he would honestly rather have every bone broken in his body, would rather drink a dozen aphrodisiacs then deal with this constant itching everywhere.

“My poor pet,” Iason murmured, knowing Riki would protest the word and when the mongrel opened his mouth to do so, he captured it and devoured it in a deep, intense kiss. When he finally gave Riki the chance to breathe, he added. “It is a term of endearment, my love, not a branding.”

“Fuc...” Riki’s mouth was captured for a second time and again he arched his body towards the Blondie, this time for an entirely different reason. “Fuck!” he gasped breathlessly when Iason released him. It had been days

since he had felt Iason's touch, but as much as he was aroused he couldn't ignore the rash on his body. "It burns!"

"Then let's cool you down." Iason reached into the pitcher of ice water on the night stand and plucked out a cube. He slowly ran the ice over the spots on Riki's chest and watched Riki moan in relief. "Is that better?"

"Yes," Riki sighed. "Everywhere, do it everywhere!"

Iason smiled and complied. He moved the ice over Riki's right arm, then his left, touching all of the spots he could reach, and then back to his chest. Finally, he grabbed a second cube of ice and started moving it across Riki's left leg, but as he did this, he slowly inserted a finger inside the mongrel.

Riki gasped, both from the ice and the sudden intrusion. In minutes, he was panting and painfully aroused, then he felt a second finger intrude as the ice flowed over his right leg. "Aahhh!" he cried, finding both relief and pleasure in Iason's actions.

The cube returned to his stomach and he felt Iason's mouth close over his arousal, he curved upward at the mixture of hot tongue and cold ice. Yes! Yes! His body was on fire from more than the spots now as Iason licked and sucked him voraciously.

"I...Iason...I...I need to..."

"Yes," Iason granted with his mouth still around his lover, as he pressed the half-melted ice-cube into the crevasse where his fingers had been. Riki shivered then cried out from the opposing sensations and seconds later Iason was lapping up his lover's salty seed.

"M...my back, please, do my back!" Riki gasped as he struggled to recover from the mind-blowing orgasm.

Iason reached up to unlatch the binders on Riki's hands, and pulled the young man into his lap. He entered Riki slowly, knowing that it had been a while since they had made love, but the ice cube had worked well for extra lubrication.

“Uuhhhhh,” Riki moaned as his arms wrapped around Iason’s neck. So good! This felt so impossibly good!

Iason selected another ice cube from the pitcher and ran it across the spots on Riki’s back. Riki shivered and then moaned as he squirmed against Iason’s lap. “Does this feel better?”

“Yes, yes...it feels...so great...”

Iason started to thrust into Riki, while maintaining his actions with the ice. Riki’s legs started moving on their own, back against the ice, then up and down on Iason, riding him with furious precision.

“More!”

“More, what?” Iason teased as he thrust deliberately. “More of this? Or more of this?” He ran the remaining of the ice over Riki’s back.

“Yes! More!”

Iason grabbed several cubes and slid them between their stomachs, so that with their bodies pressed, and moving together the ice melted and mingled with the heat. Iason could not deny that the sensations of the conflicting temperatures were intoxicating. Riki’s gasps and cries were unbelievably stimulating, especially when the ice melted onto Riki’s cock and the gasps became whimpers of pure pleasure.

Iason’s orgasm rose swiftly, surprising him.

“Now, Riki,” he murmured as he took Riki’s mouth once more and he knew that Riki understood what he meant. They soared over the edge together and Riki clung limply to him.

“Do you feel better?”

“Hmmm.”

“Shall we go again?”

Riki's response was to squirm against Iason's lap and Iason chuckled. "I'm afraid we'll need more ice."

Cal finished organizing the kitchen then turned to the cooker where he had placed a casserole. He opened the door, checked the crust and decided it needed a little longer. Retrieving a serving plate from the dish holder he turned back to the counter and saw Bean standing in the corner. The dish slipped from his hands and shattered against the kitchen floor as he stumbled backwards against the refrigeration unit and slid to the floor.

Squeezing his hand against his rapidly beating heart, he blinked through his fear and saw that he was alone. His breath came in short, frightened rasps as his gaze frantically scanned the room for a sign of the young Furniture. Had he imagined it or had Bean actually been there in the kitchen with him.

"Child?"

Cal's head swung towards the doorway and the beautiful, alien woman who entered through it; it took him a moment to push through his fog of fear and remember who she was. "I...I'm fine. I dropped something." He moved to his knees and started to pick up the pieces of the shattered plate. Within seconds a slim, dark hand appeared beside his, also reaching for the broken crockery.

"I will aid you."

"No!" He bit his lip in frustration. A Furniture must never raise his voice. "I can do it. It's sharp, you'll hurt yourself."

"Child..."

"My name is Cal." He rose, dropped the larger pieces of the dish in the recycler and forced away his fear as he activated the vacu-droid. "Please,

address me as Cal.”

“Would you like for me to comfort you, Cal?”

“No thank you.” He stepped away from her, putting the kitchen island between them, because he was afraid he would say yes. “I’m fine. Was there something you needed?”

“No, there is something you need.”

He moved to the cooker, switched off the controls and removed the casserole with a prepared set of mitts. “There is nothing I need.”

“Is there not?”

He stared down at the steaming dish. “Can you make me forget it?” he asked, quietly.

“That is beyond my skill.”

“Then anything else would be a waste of time.”

“To find relief from pain cannot be called a waste.”

He turned to her. “What *are* you?” he asked boldly, for he would never address a guest of Master Iason’s in such a way normally. “What was it you did to me?”

“It is comfort, as I explained. There is no cost to either of us, only benefit.”

Cal looked down at the casserole for several minutes, then retrieved another serving plate. “Can you feel it?”

“Feel it?”

“What I feel? My...” Shame. Fear. Disgust. Horror. “Pain. Can you feel my pain?”

“Yes.”

“How? How is that possible? How can you know what I feel when I haven’t told you?”

“It is my gift. As your gift is to care for people and do for them, so my gift offers protection and comfort.”

“How did you receive this gift?”

“Receive?”

“Were you trained with it? Is it done through hypnosis or medication? What did you sacrifice for it?” Cal was appalled at his behavior; it was not his place to ask such questions and yet he couldn’t stop doing so.

Yiela tilted her head and took a step closer to him, watched him take a step back. “There is no need to be fearful of me. I would not harm you.”

“How do you do it? How do you take away the pain? Is it something you can show me? How much will it cost? I don’t have much, but I can serve you in return!” He would only be with Master Iason and Riki until Riki was better anyway, so he would need a new purpose when the new Furniture came.

Yiela studied him and a great sadness filled her. Did no one on this horrifically superfluous and dystopian world do anything out of the kindness of their own hearts? How unbelievably tragic. “I cannot teach it to you, it is a gift that only a few of my people are born with. We do receive training, of a sort, as a way of managing the gift and learning when and how to use it. I will gladly offer my gift to you whenever you need it.”

“Why?”

“You are suffering and in need of comfort. What more reason need there be?”

He stared at her, fiddled with the spatula in his hand that he had retrieved for the casserole. “I...am not worthy of such a thing.”

“Worth is the measure of good deeds in a person. You have shown great worth, Cal.” She took another step closer, careful not to startle him or make him uneasy. “You have suffered greatly. I can ease your suffering. There is no other reason for it.”

“What of compensation?”

“I do not understand this word.”

“What do you receive from helping me.”

“Receive?” She blinked at him. “What all who do such things receive. The knowledge that you have assisted another is the only reward worth accepting.”

Cal didn’t understand her ways any more than she did his obviously, so he tried another tactic. “Does it...hurt you?”

“Hurt me?”

“You said you can feel my pain. Can you...” Could she see what had been done to him? Was it his dishonor so very obvious to someone like her? “What does that mean exactly?”

Yiela reached for a kitchen knife and sliced in once across her finger.

“What are you doing?” Cal cried and lunged forward to render aid, but the moment he did she nicked his finger as well. “Ow!”

“Do you feel that?” she asked, as she reached for a clean cloth to wrap around his finger.

“Of course!”

“As do I.” She held up her own bleeding finger, then slid it into her mouth. When she pulled it out, the bleeding had stopped. “You feel my pain.” She then took his wounded hand and gently trapped it between both of hers. “I feel your pain.”

When Cal glanced down at his finger there was no sign of the cut. His head shot up, startled. "It's gone! Completely gone. How...how did you do that? Can you heal any injury?"

"No. A small thing such as that, yes and with minimal effort."

"Could you have healed Riki's ribs? Can you mend anyone?"

She smiled. "I am not God, young Cal. I have some talent, true, though there are limits." She paused. "I must ask that you not mention this to Iason. He finds me foreign enough and I believe learning of such a thing may cause more tension between us."

"I...cannot lie to him."

"I do not expect you to do so. I simply ask that you not broach the subject yourself."

Cal nodded, he would do that for her, as she had helped him before, even if it was for just a little while. "I will keep your secret as long as I am able and I sincerely thank you for the...comfort you offered me earlier, but it would be better if you did not do so again."

Yiela shook her head. "The people of this world are strange indeed. You choose to continue suffering rather than receive comfort. You chose to be completely independent rather than accept any sort of assistance. You and Riki are very much alike in this regard."

Being compared to Riki for any reason caused a surge of both embarrassment and pride within Cal. "You are mistaken. I am merely Furniture."

"You are so much more than that, Cal, and if those here cannot see it than I shall take you away to Avalon with me, where you may run in the green, grassy fields and swim in the shining waters of our lakes as a child your age should. Fresh air, a full belly and a row of spin is what you need, beyond a doubt."

“Spin? What is that?”

“It is a game that all the young boys play. One is chosen to be blindfolded and he is spun about three or four times. Then he must try and catch the other boys who run around close to him, but never too close. It is a wonderful game with much laughter. I can teach it to you, if you like?”

“No, I do not believe that would be appropriate.” Although Cal couldn’t help but wonder at such a game. How did one see to chase someone if they are blindfolded? It sounded horribly dangerous to him. “I need to see to the meal.” He turned back to the counter to do just that and Yielā sighed and moved away.

She stepped down into the living area, then started back up the stairs to Riki’s room. She paused outside the door at the sounds coming from inside and scowled. Was the android hurting Maku? Another sound gave her cause to suspect that pain was not involved. She could not understand how her beloved Prince could do such things with a machine, or why. They could not procreate, and she did not believe that an android could experience passion. Still, the Queen had warned her not to interfere and so she would obey that directive. Her Prince had been lost to her for so long, she would do nothing to destroy the thin link between them now. She never wished to go back to that horrible, painful ache that she had lived all these years with.

Finding that a headache was coming on, she moved back down the stairs and lay on one of the twin sofas, which was surprisingly comfortable. Within minutes she was asleep.

Chapter 19

Summary for the Chapter:

Riki wakes up after a night with Iason and with a clear head for the first time in days

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you thank you, thank you everyone who commented! I love it when I hear from you and I am delighted you enjoyed the last chapter. No smut in this one, sorry, but I hope you'll like it none the less. Nice long one for ya!

Riki woke and stretched luxuriously. Iason had worn him out last night, but he slept like a babe once they were done, and he'd been able to forget about the infernal itching for a while. He glanced down at his chest and arms and saw that while the spots were still there they were fading, as was the urge to scratch.

He turned his head and spotted Iason still sleeping beside him, which was unusual. If they were in bed together he would normally wake up wrapped in the Blondie's arms, or the moment he moved Iason would respond, but this time Iason was laying on his side facing Riki, still sleeping deeply and with his arm stretched out across the massive bed as if searching for his lover.

A spark of concern flashed through Riki and he carefully put his hand to Iason's mouth, then remembered that Iason didn't actually breathe. Iason was okay, right? He hadn't shut down permanently, had he?

Riki slid further over in the bed, closer to Iason, and chewed on his lower lip as he considered whether or not to touch the beautiful being beside him. If Iason was just sleeping, the Blondie could probably use the rest, as he had been working almost non-stop since they had returned. If he wasn't sleeping...Riki didn't know what he would do if Iason wasn't sleeping.

Riki flinched in surprise as Iason's eyes opened and those piercing blue orbs settled upon him.

"How much longer are you going to stare at me?" the Blondie purred, curious.

"Son of a...!" Riki put a hand to his heart and flopped onto his back. "Don't *do* that to me. I thought you were dead."

Iason rose up on one arm, reached a hand across and pulled Riki towards him so the mongrel was almost fully trapped beneath his body and gaze. "Why would you think that?"

Riki shrugged and tried to get away, suddenly uncomfortable at having been caught worrying. "You're usually up, that's all."

Iason's hold on Riki put an end to the mongrel's struggles as he pulled his lover closer. "Oh, I'm up." He nudged Riki below the covers to prove his point.

"Awake! I mean you usually wake up before me, or as soon as I move, like you got radar or something."

"Ah." Iason rolled onto his back, pulling Riki with him. "I'm just tired."

Riki hesitated only a moment before letting his head fall against Iason's chest. It was still hard for him, sometimes, not to fight against the attraction, the need he had to be close to Iason. He supposed that was the mongrel pride in him. His fingers moved of their own volition towards the long strands of blond hair that draped along Iason's side and he found a couple to play with.

"How are your spots?"

"They still itch, but it's not as bad today."

"Good."

“Yeah.” Riki found that his eyes were starting to drift closed again against the warmth and comfort of being next to Iason. He forced them open. “Are you going to work?”

“Eventually.” Iason’s fingers dove into Riki’s hair in a familiar caress and he let his own eyes shut.

“Do you wanna do it?”

“Eventually.”

Riki slowly lifted his head and saw that Iason was going back to sleep. He reached for the cover to pull it up around them. “Iason?” When the Blondie didn’t answer Riki assumed that he had shut down again, so he took a moment to study the Elite. He rarely had the chance to do so, he was usually occupied or distracted by what Iason’s hands and mouth were doing to pay attention to Iason’s body.

It was perfectly human like, with the exception that Iason’s skin was a little too pale and his body a little too perfect. His flesh was cool to the touch, and held no natural warmth but it wasn’t a bad sensation and it while the body was hard, muscular, the skin was ridiculously smooth and soft.

Riki glanced back at Iason, saw the Blondie’s eyes were still shut, and let his fingers drift over Iason’s chest. He lifted the covers slightly and saw that, yes, Iason was indeed up, and the sight of that massive organ had his own body responding. The urge to move lower and wrap his mouth around Iason’s cock was strong, if it was Guy lying here he would not hesitate; they both had free reign of each other’s bodies, but that was not the case with Iason.

He let the cover drop again and pulled back enough that he could stretch out on his back and stare up at the ceiling. Iason wasn’t Guy and their relationship was in no way equal, maybe that’s why he continued to fight sometimes or deliberately tried to piss Iason off. He’d stopped thinking of himself as a victim years ago, but still the anger and resentment festered inside of him and sometimes exploded at Iason. Was it because that was the only way he could feel they were even? He didn’t want to do that anymore,

he truly believed the words he had told the Queen and Guy; he truly believed he loved Iason, but then why wasn't he happy? Why did he continue to fight on some levels? He didn't know the reason, and he didn't know how to stop.

"Riki?"

"Yeah?"

"Come to me."

Riki curled back against Iason, wishing everything could be that easy, that he could want to obey all the time. "I'm here."

Iason squeezed Riki and snuggled into him, but didn't open his eyes. "I missed you."

"I didn't go anywhere."

"I missed you," the Blondie said again.

"Yeah, okay." On some level, Riki supposed he had missed Iason as well. Sometimes being out of Iason's reach was excruciating, even if it was just for a little while.

His eyes closed and stayed closed as he drifted off.

When Riki woke the second time he was alone in the bed and Iason was just coming out of their closet pulling on his gloves. "You're dressed," he said as he raised up on his elbows.

"You sound surprised." Iason pinned the broach that Riki had given him on the front of his deep blue tunic, delighted when Riki's cheeks turned the slightest shade of pink.

Riki did not see Cal in the room with them. "Who dressed you?"

Iason leaned down and kissed Riki on the lips. "I am capable of dressing myself without help."

“Really?”

The dryness in the mongrel’s voice had Iason picking up a pillow and playfully shoving it in Riki’s face. “I will, however, have to register for a new Furniture.”

Riki pulled the pillow across his lap and sat up. “Don’t send him away again!”

“Who?” Iason inquired as he reached into the box that contained the two bracelets that had been Riki’s gift and clipped one to his wrist. Even though the bands did not work on him, he enjoyed wearing Riki’s gift.

“Cal!”

“I am not sending him away.”

“Then why do you need a new Furniture?”

“Cal’s position with us has changed, Riki. I still have not been able to repeal the age law for Furniture, so he cannot reassume that role, however if you recall I did make him my ward and your tutor so that he could stay with us.”

Riki rose up on his knees as Iason moved towards him and stood by the bed. “He can really stay?”

“Of course.” Iason slid his hands around Riki’s slim waist and indulged in a playful caress of the mongrel’s bare ass.

“Then why do we need new Furniture? Cal can do all of that for us and...”

“Cal’s responsibilities no longer pertain to managing a household, Riki, and it is unheard of for one to be without Furniture.”

Riki tossed the pillow away and scrambled off the bed. “Fuck that shit! You’re Iason Fucking Mink! No one tells you what to do so don’t give me that garbage. Are you really gonna make Cal go through having another

Furniture in this house? What if he turns out like Bean? What if he's worse than that and he betrays *you* this time?"

Iason studied Riki quietly. "What if he does?" he countered. "Are you going to abandon him in Ceres as well?"

"I..." Shit! How had Iason known? Had Yielā told him? His question must have shown on his face because Iason had an answer for it.

"You were quite late coming home the other day and so I checked where you were."

"Checked..." Riki flushed angrily. "You aren't supposed to use the damn tracker, Iason! You promised!"

Iason caught Riki's attempted swing and then trapped his naked lover in his arms.

"I was worried," he returned firmly. "You must allow me a period of adjustment now that you may come and go as you please. It may seem lovely and freeing for you, Riki, however it causes me great concern each time you are outside of Eos."

Riki's body relaxed. He hadn't considered how such a thing might be still bothering Iason. It had been several days now since he had first been granted such freedom and given the air-bike. "I told you I'm not leaving, Iason. I promised."

"I know and I believe you, but others have taken you from me far too often for me not to be anxious." Iason moved his thumb across Riki's bruised and scraped knuckles. "Especially when you return injured."

Riki gritted his teeth. "What did you do?" Had the Furniture escaped the hell he'd been left to in Ceres? Was Bean still alive or had Iason taken care of that as well? Would Iason punish him now for what he had done?

"I made some inquiries." When Iason caught a flicker of concern in Riki's hot gaze, he continued. "None that will be traced, Riki. You are quite skilled

at being discrete, but I am better.”

“How much do you know?”

“I know enough.”

“Where is he? How did you find him? What...”

“Bean is no longer our concern,” Iason assured firmly.

“What did you do to him?”

“He will not trouble us again, that is all that you need to know.” Iason could see the conflict written in Riki’s eyes, a combination of relief and regret and he wondered if Riki himself realized his own true morality. Riki generated the façade of a hard-nosed, unforgiving marauder, but in fact he had a very soft heart. He never wanted to actually hurt anyone, but he had grown up with in a life that was surrounded by violence and so he’d had to fight to survive.

Although he was not entirely sure what fate Riki had meant for Bean by abandoning him in Ceres, given what he had learned quickly became of the Furniture he’d decided that Riki’s choice of punishment had been harsh, if not oddly appropriate. Still he’d had to be sure that no one found out about what Riki had done to Bean, as that could still lead to repercussions, and so he had taken it upon himself to permanently deal with the matter.

“It was my choice,” Riki muttered and finally lowered his eyes. “You said it was my decision to punish him. Why did you get involved if it was up to me?”

“How could I not?” Iason demanded. “Riki, if what you had done was discovered...”

“It wouldn’t have been! If you have just left it alone! I didn’t want you involved in this at all! It was my choice, *my* decision, or was that a lie? I still don’t have any fucking rights do I? I still don’t have a *choice*!”

“You are *mine!*” Iason growled as he tightly gripped Riki’s arms, annoyed by Riki’s words, although he understood it was Riki’s temper and not his heart that was talking. “I will not allow anyone to take you from me. I will not allow anyone to hold your actions or those of another’s against us. I will protect what is mine and that is *you.*” He pulled Riki close against him again. “That will always be you and I will not apologize for doing what I must to keep you safe.”

“Then I’m still just a pet!” Riki snapped, and then cursed himself. He was doing it again, deliberately antagonizing Iason, dredging up old wounds that should have stayed buried. Why was he doing that? Why couldn’t he stop?

“Yes!” Iason caught Riki’s face between his large hands and stared into Riki’s eyes. “You are my pet, but you are also my lover and now, legally you are my mate. I am a Blondie of Tanagura, Riki. I can change many things, adapt to many situations, but I cannot deny the truth of my rights as a Blondie as they have been for the past millennia. Time does not have the same meaning for us as it does for Humans, and while to you the changes in our relationship have taken years for me it is merely a fortnight.”

“What are you saying?”

“I need more time. I need a longer period to adjust, to be the mate you wish me to be.” Iason pulled Riki back into his arms. “I am trying so very hard to be what you want, my love, but it is very difficult, and it is made more so by your impatience and constant belligerence. I know you consider a pet to be something horrid and dirty but it is not, not to an Elite. Pets are to be desired and cherished, as I desire and treasure you. I wish I could make you understand.”

“If we’re so desired and cherished why do you just discard us when we grow too old?”

Iason pulled back enough to look down at Riki. “You have not been discarded.”

Riki thought of Jana and Mimea. “Others have.”

“Yes, and I cannot give you a reason that you will find acceptable as to why that happens, but the discarding of pets does not mean they are not loved, Riki. It does not mean that their owners were not happy and fulfilled to have them, or that the pets were not equally happy to be with their masters.”

Riki knew that the society he lived in it was every man for himself, and being a pet was often a significant climb out of the gutter. There were the Elites and then there was everyone else, but pets were considered better than mongrels and he never could understand why. He just couldn't apply such a life to himself and believe it fair or right; even though he had lived as a pet for several years.

“You can't make me understand the good things about being a pet and I can't make you understand why I hate it so much,” Riki countered quietly. “I guess we'll never agree on those things.”

“No. I don't believe we will.”

They both fell silent for a moment, and finally Riki lifted his gaze to meet Iason's.

“I need to go away.”

Iason's eyes hardened. “Away where?”

Riki shrugged. “Anywhere but here.”

“This again.” Iason released him and stalked over to his dresser to pick up his watch and com unit. “When will you stop running away Riki?”

“I...I'm not running away, not this time.” Riki curled his hands into fists for a moment before moving over and standing behind Iason. After another moment's hesitation, he slid his arms around the Blondie's waist and pressed his cheek to Iason's back. “I'm really not running away. A lot's happened, too much. I need to get a clear head and I...I can't do this here.” When Iason didn't respond, he continued. “Just for a little while. I'll take Yiel and Cal with me...”

Iason spun around. “You want to go off alone with that female?”

“For fuck’s sake, Iason, I don’t want to do her! I don’t even like women!”

“As I recall liking them does not stop you from fucking them!”

This was getting too intense, Riki decided. Maybe they both needed a break. “No, it doesn’t, but I have no interest in Yielia that way. You said that it could be dangerous if people discovered her powers...”

“That is true, however...”

“And you also said that you’re really busy with work and that’s why you haven’t been home much.”

“That is unavoidable and...”

“And I think it would be good for Cal too, to get away from here and just relax for a while. Yielia can help me with my issues away from everyone else and we can help Cal with his issues and then when we come back we can all be...”

“Be?” Iason demanded, crossing his arms over his chest. He wasn’t liking this idea one bit.”

Riki slid his arms around Iason again and hugged him. “Better, maybe.”

Iason scowled in frustration but returned Riki’s embrace. “Jupiter has changed your designation. Things will be easier for you here now. Is this really necessary?”

“Yeah, I think it is.”

“We only just returned, Riki!”

“I know.

“Are you not happy here, even now? Are things not better between us?”

Riki again lifted his gaze to look up at the man he loved. “Are you? Happy, I mean?”

“Riki, I am happy so long as you are with me. So long as you are here to come home to and you are willing to let me touch you and be with you. That is all that I require. That is all that will make me happy.”

Which meant that when Riki continued to fight or be belligerent that made Iason unhappy. Again he found himself wondering when he had started worrying about the Elite’s happiness. He knew he loved Iason, whether that love had grown out of his conditioning or obvious hopelessness of his situation, or had developed in some other way he couldn’t say, but he had stopped fighting it either way.

He really didn’t understand why Iason loved him, wanted him. Yielia had assured him that his powers, or whatever they were, would probably not be the cause and yet what other reason was there? He still fought Iason on many levels, still tried to maintain his independence and he was far too quick to anger. Why then did Iason keep him around? Until he understood that basic truth he would never be truly secure or comfortable with their relationship.

“Okay.” Riki let his head rest against Iason’s solid chest tabled the rest of his argument, for now. “I’ll stay.”

“Thank you. You may find things are better for you in Eos now, at least try it.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll try.”

Iason pulled back and cradled Riki’s face. “Believe it or not I do not like saying no to you.”

Riki smirked, not because he felt like laughing, but he felt he needed to lighten the mood for both those sakes. “You sure about that?” It had the desired effect and Iason smiled.

“I do want you to be happy, Riki.”

“Okay.”

Iason kissed Riki long enough that both of them wanted to crawl back into bed, and then reluctantly pulled away. “Why don’t you come see me this afternoon, if you are feeling up to it, and we’ll have lunch together?”

“Sure.”

“We should go shopping for some new outfits for you, as well.”

“Huh? Why?”

“You can hardly wear pet clothing or your mongrel attire, given your new status.”

“A technician doesn’t need fancy clothes.”

“No, but my legal mate does.”

Riki gaped at Iason as he suddenly remembered the full change in his status that Iason had delivered to him days ago, before he got sick. He barely remembered having some kind of conversation with Iason in the bathroom about getting a job, but the rest had been completely fogged over due to his illness.”

“I...You...I...”

Iason crouched beside him in an instant. “What is it? Are you feeling ill again?” Iason touched Riki’s forehead. “You do not have a fever.”

“I’m a...I’m your...” Riki tried to swallow and found some sort of knot had lodged in his throat. What had it been? Consort something or other? What did that mean? Who did that make him? What was he now? “Who... what...?”

“What is it, Riki? What is wrong?”

“I...I think I need to see Jupiter.”

Iason scowled. “Why? What *is* wrong?”

“I...I just have some...some questions for Her. Can you arrange it?”

“I will try.” Iason again put his hand to Riki’s forehead. “Are you sure you are alright?”

“I’m okay. I am.” He just felt like he was going to puke again. “Just...go to work.”

Iason reluctantly rose. “As you wish. I will contact you regarding the meeting, however if you are still unwell...”

“I’m fine. I’ll be fine. Really.”

Iason nodded. “See you soon then.” He turned and exited the bedroom and Riki fell back onto the bed.

Happy Consort? Hung Consort? Hell Consort? What had been the title that Iason had mentioned? *Why* would they change his title and why in the name of Jupiter was this just getting through to him now?

“CAL!”

The young man appeared in the doorway of the bedroom almost immediately. “Yes, Riki?”

“Do you know? Do you know what I am? What am I?”

Cal blinked. “What...are you?” Was Riki’s illness making him delirious? “Are you feeling worse? Should I call for the doctor?”

“No!” Riki rose up and started towards, Cal, realized he was naked and grabbed the sheet off the bed and wrapped it around himself. “A title, I have a new title. Do you know what it is?”

“I...I have not been informed. I do apologize, I...”

“Prince High Consort, I believe was the term.”

Riki turned to Yielā who stood in the doorway. “Prince?” he squeaked, in a very un-Riki like manner. “Why Prince? What did you tell them? Is this your way of trying to get me to leave and go back to Avalon?”

“I said nothing to anyone,” she assured.

“Then why a Prince?” Riki slowly lowered himself back onto the bed even as Cal moved inside the room and poured a glass of water. “Why would Jupiter use the title of Prince?”

“Perhaps in recognition of your status?” Yielā suggested as Cal offered Riki the water.

“But I’m *not* a Prince.”

“You *are* a Prince, soon to be a King.”

“No. I’m. Not!”

Yielā sighed. “Denying your lineage does not make it disappear, Maku. You are a Prince of Avalon. Now you are a Prince here, although I suspect your title here is only in name and not by any form of legal right or royal succession.”

Riki drank down the water, then absently started to scratch at his chest, only to have his hand lightly smacked away by Cal. “Oh.” He glanced down at the spots. “Right.” He lifted his gaze again. “Look, what I am asking is what does it mean *here*?”

“I am unable to say, as I do not understand your ways here.” Yielā glanced at Cal who had already retrieved the salve and started applying it to Riki’s chest. “Perhaps you understand this *knew* provision?”

“I do not and would not care to hazard a guess,” Cal admitted. Riki had a new title? Did that mean he was no longer a pet? “Perhaps if you asked Master Iason?”

“No. I need to talk to Jupiter. I will talk to Jupiter, I just...” Riki just needed to hash it out with someone else first, someone he trusted and could depend

on to understand his mild panic. "It's fine. Get out, I need to get dressed."

"Dressed?" Yielā asked. "Do you believe you are going somewhere?"

"Yes." Riki snatched the salve from Cal. "I can do it. Out."

"You are ill," Yielā stated. "You cannot go outside for at least another two days."

"Well, that's not gonna work for me, so..." He made shooing motions with his hands at both of them. "Scram!" He entered the washroom and slammed the door.

After a quick shower, he returned to the room and found Cal still there, waiting for him.

"Would you like me to help you dress?" he asked quietly.

"No." Riki started for his closet as Cal nodded and moved towards the door. "That doesn't mean you have to leave." He waited until he saw Cal return to his original spot before grabbing his usual clothes jeans, tank and socks. Returning to the bedroom he dropped the clothes on the bed. "Where's that gunk?"

Cal stared at him blankly. "Gunk?"

"That stuff to make it stop itching."

"You brought it into the wash area with you."

"Oh, right." Riki walked back into the washroom and returned with the salve. He quickly dabbed the cream over his arms, legs and chest, then handed it to Cal. "You can do my back."

"Yes." Cal quickly spread the cream as Riki pulled on his jeans. "There you are. You should wash your hands."

"Oh." Riki sniffed at the now strong smell of mint and herbs on his hands. "Okay. You too." He returned to the washroom and quickly washed his

hands in the sink, then stepped aside and waited for Cal to do the same.
“Well? Wash.”

“I will use wash area in my room, Riki.”

“Just do it here, so we can go.”

“Go? Are you still intending to leave the apartment, Riki? You are not fully recovered.”

“Which is why I’m taking you with me.”

Cal blinked. “With you?”

“Yeah, so wash your hands. I’m gonna finish getting dressed.” Riki waited until he saw Cal move to the sink before he stepped back into the bedroom. He stopped by the nightstand, picked up his silver bracelet and fastened it around his left wrist, then added his watch to his right. His fingers paused over the remaining mood bracelet, then finally he fastened that to his left wrist as well; since Iason was wearing his.

When Cal returned Riki was just pulling on his red and black jacket. “Riki, Master Iason will be very upset if your condition worsens...”

“I’m fine.” Riki glanced at Cal. “Wear this.”

Cal just barely caught the leather jacket tossed at him, Riki’s jacket, the one he’d worn in Ceres. It was old and worn, but the leather was soft as rose petal. “I...I can’t wear this.”

“You’ll have to, your regular jacket won’t be warm enough.”

“Warm enough for what?” Cal asked, even as he followed Riki out of the room. He was still clutching the jacket in his hands when they arrived in the building’s garage a few moment later. “Riki, please at least tell me where you are going.”

“To see a friend, but first things first.” He entered his lock release code and his air bike rose from the compartment in the floor. “Did you tell Iason to buy this for me?”

Cal stared at the bike and then met Riki's gaze squarely. "It was merely a suggestion." So Iason had chosen to get the air-cycle for Riki, that pleased him. He would have liked to have been there to see Riki's reaction. "Was it not the one you wanted?"

"It was and because of that, you get the first ride."

"M...Me?" Cal had never been on such one of those death machines in his life and the thought of doing so caused his calming facade to quickly diminish. "You cannot ride this in your condition and I...I must get re-situated with my dut..."

"Nope. First we're gonna take a ride."

"No, but I..."

"Safety first, Iason insists." Riki pulled on a helmet, then dropped one over Cal's head as well and secured it.

"Riki!" Came Cal's muffled response behind the face visor, before he had the sense to flip it up. "Stop this nonsense now and let's return..."

"Furniture's aren't supposed to talk back," Riki reminded as he pulled the jacket out of Cal's hands and quickly slid the younger man's arms through it.

"That's nonsense!" Cal retorted, even as he allowed Riki to fit him with the jacket. "Of course we may, or how can we maintain what is best for the pet..."

Riki gently smacked the visor on Cal's helmet closed. "I'm not a pet anymore, remember?"

He slid a leg over the air-bike and looked at Cal. "Get on."

"Riki...are you truly no longer a pet?"

"Seems like. Why, you disappointed?"

“No...no I...” Cal was actually elated.

He sympathized greatly with Riki for everything he had endured over the years and the cruel treatment he had received from others. Part of him wanted to throw himself at Riki and hug him so tightly, but he could not. It would be totally inappropriate and while he had made that mistake a couple of times before, he had to maintain perfection now, or risk being dismissed.

“Cal?” Riki couldn’t see Cal’s expression through the helmet and when he reached to lift the visor again the younger man stepped back, just out of reach. Maybe he was pushing Cal too hard? People coped with trauma in all sorts of ways, but he really wanted Cal with him for this. He had to do something to bring back the young kid that Cal had been.”

“I am happy for you., Riki. You deserve it.”

“Yeah, so get on already. Iason wants me back for lunch and I won’t be if you keep standing there.”

“I’ve never ridden on an air-cycle.”

“Now’s your chance.” Riki patted the seat behind him. “Come on.”

Cautiously Cal climbed on behind him, not because he wanted to but because it seemed important to Riki that he do so. “Is this okay?”

“Yeah, you can hang onto the back rack or hang onto me, which is probably more secure.”

After some hesitation, Cal caught the sides of Riki’s jacket between his fingers. “Like this?”

Riki pulled the boy’s arms around him. “Like this.” He felt Cal start to pull back and trapped his arms at his waist. “We’re gonna go fast and you aren’t used to this. I don’t want you to fall off, so hold tight, okay?” He hoped rush of speed and feel of the wind would help Cal relieve some of his tension.

“Ye...yes.”

Riki could feel Cal's body start to tremble and he suspected it was less about riding the bike and more about his recent circumstances. "I'll never let anything happen to you, Cal. You're safe with me, okay? You'll always be safe with me."

Cal did feel safe with Riki, but he could not help the feelings of shame that rose inside of him. "I...I know."

"Good." Riki started the bike and a moment later they roared out of the garage.

Notes for the Chapter:

P.S. if anyone can guess where Riki is headed I will put their name in the next chapter somewhere, so be sure to comment with the name you want added in case you are right :-)) and don't forget to also review!!

Chapter 20

Summary for the Chapter:

Katze is trying to get away fro vacation and Riki seeks advice from a friend

Cal had never felt anything like this in his life. The air rushing past them as they sped down the open road on the air-bike was a very new, and at first frightening experience. Initially, he had been nervous and afraid, having his arms around Riki and being this close to someone. He had been more ashamed when his body started shaking uncontrollably, but Riki did not seem to notice. Instead, the more he shook, the faster the bike went, until Cal could feel nothing but the wind and speed. At one point, they hit several sharp turns in the road and he felt himself squealing and hugging Riki even tighter; he even felt the vibration of Riki's laughter at his response and it had somehow relaxed him and chased away his remaining fear and doubts.

Finally, they pulled up to an isolated spot in the road, a good distance outside of Tanagura. Riki set his feet on the ground, switched off the engine and the bike hovered quietly.

"You okay?" he asked, patting Cal's locked hands which had not yet released him.

"I...I think so." Slowly Cal pulled back and sat up on the bike, and as he did he felt the same and fears starting to return. "I...I apologize for..."

"I was fucked by a man when I was eight."

Cal was stunned silent at Riki's calm admission. "I...I'm sorry, Riki."

"Why?" Riki nudged Cal to dismount and then he did the same. He pulled off his helmet, set it on the bike, then carefully undid the straps on Cal's. "You didn't do it."

“No, but...” Pets were initiated at twelve, as their adolescence began and they could start to feel and understand pleasure. While he knew that Ceres was a rough city, he had not imagined that children were being molested. “It must have been very difficult for you.”

Riki set Cal’s helmet next to his on the bike, and despite the fact that they were almost the same size now, he ruffled the younger boy’s hair. “I suppose it was, but not as hard as it would have been if I had been raised somewhere else.” Like Avalon, he thought. If he had been raised in such a seemingly warm and supportive environment as that he would probably have been devastated by the rape, but instead he had grown up in Ceres and had witnessed far worse than sex with a minor before he was five.

Cal stared at the ground and wondered what he could say, why they were even discussing this. “You...you have come a long way from that young boy, I would say.”

“Yeah, I have, but I still remember how the feeling of having no control, the feeling of shame and despair at what was being done to me.” Riki stepped off the road and started walking into the desert that surround both sides of their path. “Come on.”

Cal followed quietly, wondering again where they were going.

“I remember how that felt and I told myself I would never feel that way again.”

“What did you do?”

“I fought. I did whatever was necessary to make everyone understand that I wouldn’t be quietly attacked or beaten again.” Riki shrugged. “Sometimes they still got me, but it wasn’t easy and I made them pay for it after.” He paused as he thought of all the people he’d had to hurt, all the ways he himself had been hurt and how it had devoured almost all sense of real feeling inside of him. Perhaps that was why he was still having trouble with Iason, he didn’t know how to feel happy or content or anything other than stifled and angry. “I was angry for a really, really long time.”

“I can imagine.” Cal shuffled lightly at the sand under his feet. “Did it work? Fighting back?”

“Yeah, not overnight, but eventually I got a reputation of someone not to be messed with. That’s just what I had to do to survive, Cal, and we all have to do what we must to survive, you know?”

“Yes.” Still, Cal could not help but feel remorse for the child Riki had been.

“Iason always told me that pets have no right to feel shame. Did you know that?”

Cal nodded. “Yes.”

“Do you know why?”

“Because they are pets and it is their function to please their masters.”

“Yeah, but do you know why they shouldn’t feel shame?”

Cal started to feel uncomfortable about this conversation. What was Riki getting at? Why would he be talking about...? He stopped walking abruptly as humiliation filled him. No. No, this couldn’t be happening! “You... know,” he whispered.

Riki turned to look at Cal. “Yeah. I know, and so does Iason.”

“I...I...I...” What could he say? How could they have allowed him to come back if they already knew about what had happened to him? Why would they do such a thing and risk tarnishing the household of Mink? Cal turned back towards the road. “I will be gone by the morning.”

“So, you’re just gonna walk away from your responsibilities?”

Cal’s back stiffened. “I can no longer perform my responsibilities to a proper degree.”

“You can read, can’t you? You can talk? What else does a teacher need to do his job?”

Cal's hands threatened to curl into fists but he willed them to stay straight at his sides. "That...that was to help you find your people and you have done that."

"Music doesn't have anything to do with where I come from, neither did science. And the books you got for me to read weren't all books about possible home planets."

"I...I wanted to present a well-balanced lesson plan, that is all!"

"So now you're just gonna leave, when I'm only half way through that lesson plan?"

"You can find another teacher." Cal turned around again, after getting control of himself and making his expression neutral. "I cannot stay. I am damaged now and..."

"Who the hell's gonna teach *me*, Cal? I'm a mongrel! A pet! No one wants to teach me anything except maybe how to go fuck myself."

"I cannot stay..."

"Because you're damaged," Riki repeated.

"Y...yes. Riki, you don't always understand the politics of things. If what happened to me was revealed it would bring shame to Master Iason. It is a Furniture's job to maintain the finances and the dignity of his Master's household. There is no dignity in..." Being attacked by three men. Being raped and sodomized and beaten to unconsciousness with no way to hide his eunuch body. Hands and teeth and fingers and lips and the sounds, dear Jupiter the sounds of things entering and exiting his body and their piercing laughter when he cried...

"You're not Furniture anymore, Cal."

Cal blinked and tried to pull himself away from his horrific memories. "W...what?"

“You’re Iason’s ward remember? He reminded me this morning. You’re his ward and my tutor so what can they say about you? What does anyone dare say about you or about Iason when it’s a fact that Iason Mink has taken a mongrel man as his pet?”

“I...No, it’s...you...” Cal’s calm veneer was quickly fading in the wake of Riki’s charges. “You don’t understand, you...”

“I don’t understand?” Riki snapped and stepped forward to grab Cal by the arms. “Did you forget who you’re talking to?”

“P...please, Riki. Let go, I...I can’t...” The trembling had started again. Dear, Jupiter when would it end? Would he never be whole again?

“You don’t want to be touched? Why? Do you think I’ll attack you? Hold you down and fuck you?”

“N...no, of course not, but...”

“Have I ever hurt you, Cal?” When Cal continued to stare at the ground, Riki gave him a gentle, but firm shake. “Look at me!”

“P...please, Riki...” Cal whispered but met Riki’s gaze.

“Have I *ever* hurt you?” Riki was startled by the memory of when Iason had found him again in Ceres, after his year of freedom. Iason had asked a similar question and Riki had been unable to properly answer. “I let you dress me, bathe me despite the fact that I hated it. I let you lead me around on a fucking chain and leash through Eos that was beyond humiliating. I let you do all those things to me and have I ever, ever once hurt you for it?”

“No.”

“Do you really think after all that shit I would actually ever hurt you, now that we’ve become close? Now that we’ve become friends?”

Friends? Him and Riki? Was that even possible? The idea of it was both alarming and exciting. “N...No.”

Riki softened his tone. “Do you trust me, Cal?”

“Yes.”

“Then show me that you’re not afraid of me.” Riki pulled Cal into his arms. “Show the world that you’re not afraid of anyone, Cal.” His heart broke at how badly Cal was shaking against him, especially when the younger boy tried to struggle free, but he held on. “It’s okay to feel fear, but you can’t *ever* show it; not to me, not to Iason and certainly not to those fuckers who hurt you.”

“I...It’s hard. I...I feel it a...all the time and...I...I can’t m...make it st...stop.”

“Tell me what you’re afraid of.”

Cal pulled back and eyes swimming with unshed tears lifted to Riki’s. “Them,” he croaked. “I...I’m afraid t...they’ll...f...find me a...again. T... They said they were going to k...keep me. T...they said I...I belonged to them and they...they were going to...to f...fuck me until...until....” A sob broke through and Cal suddenly clung to Riki. “Until I was dead.”

Riki could feel the rage building inside of him, making his own body shake and he firmly pushed it back, because he knew that those men would never hurt Cal again. He didn’t speak, just held onto Cal as the boy sobbed out his fear and grief. Cal was tall for his age, he’d gone through quite a growth spurt over the last year, but the simple fact was that Cal was still just a kid.

He supposed he could have used that justification with Bean as well, but Bean was different. There had been something arrogant and sinister in Bean, it had been as if Bean had no conscience or remorse, no concept of right or wrong. The boy had been deliberately malicious and so Riki refused to feel any regret towards him.

Cal finally pulled back, or started to, but Riki caught his shoulders. “Those men won’t ever hurt you again, Cal,” he promised, quietly and made sure that Cal saw the truth in his eyes.

When Cal did, his eyes teared up again. “Oh, Riki. What have you done?”

“What I had to.” He let his hand slid through Cal’s hair. “What needed to be done, just like when I was growing up in Ceres to protect myself and my gang. You are part of that gang now, Cal and I’ve made sure that you’ll be safe. No one will ever hurt you again.” When Cal continued to stare at him, he continued. “I get how it is to be so out of control of your own mind and body. I understand what it is to feel shame and fear and want to just curl up and die, or run away, far away somewhere, but none of that solves the problem. You have to face it. You have to face it, even though it’s hard and it’s scary and you have to understand, to believe that it is not your fault. That none of it is your fault.”

“I...but I suspected something was wrong with Bean! I...I should have... but I was preoccupied with you and Master Iason and I...”

“Cal, let me tell you something I haven’t admitted to another living soul.”

Cal’s eyes widened.

“I offered myself to Iason long before he made me a pet.”

“You...you did?”

Riki nodded, grimly. “He saved me from a severe beating, and I was in his debt. The only way I could repay him was with my body; that’s just how things are in Ceres.”

“And...he accepted?”

“Not at first. At first, he treated me like I was beneath him, but he finally agreed and...” Riki thought back to that day, in the musty room in Midas where a Blondie had made him come multiple times just by watching and a bit of touching. “He changed me. He made me feel things I hadn’t thought possible and then, he ripped it away as if it was nothing. I hated him for that. I wanted revenge on him for damaging my pride, for making me cry out in a way I had never done with anyone else.”

“R...Riki,” Cal murmured, half in awe and half in sympathy.

“That should have been the end of it, would have been, but I put myself in a place I could never imagine by being stupid and arrogant. The day Iason took me as his pet, I had followed him because I wanted to try and get revenge for the way he had made me feel that time. I don’t even know what I thought I could possibly do to get revenge on a Blondie, but I was young and stupid and I lost my freedom because of it. Iason took me and kept me. He stole my freedom and trained me to be his pet and I could do nothing about it.”

Cal had not known the full story of how Riki had come to be with Iason, but now that he did he could not help but feel regret over the way he had initially had to treat the mongrel. “I didn’t know,” he said. “I was harsh with you because I believed you were just being a disobedient pet. I didn’t know, Riki. I am sorry.”

“No, that’s...I’m not trying to make you feel guilty, here, Cal, I’m trying to explain that what happened to me could be construed as my own fault, because I was foolish enough to go after a Blondie, but in truth I had no concept of what would happen to me. Do you think I would have followed Iason if I had even suspected the truth?”

Cal slowly shook his head.

“And it’s the same with you. You didn’t understand what Bean was capable of any more than I understood Iason. You gave him the benefit of the doubt, you believed he would at least have the same morality as other Furniture, because that was what you were used to. I believed that I could put one over on a Blondie and survive unscathed because I had it done to so many others before. I was used to getting away with such behavior, and you were used to receiving respect from other Furniture. Neither of us could have predicted this outcome. Neither of us could have known what was going to happen to us, so it’s useless to blame ourselves for what we couldn’t see coming.”

Somehow, Riki’s words were getting through Cal’s fog of fear, shame and rage. Katze had tried to tell him the same thing, as had Master Raoul, but

only Riki's words seemed to make real sense to him. "It...it's not my fault?"

"No. Not."

"But...but I feel so...so dirty and...and..."

"And?"

"Angry!" Cal admitted as he wiped away another tear that slipped out and had started down his cheek. "I'm so very, very angry, Riki and I've never felt like this before, ever. I don't know how to stop it, or how to keep it in check and I am so very afraid it will explode at the worst time, in front of Master Iason or a guest or..."

"I get living with rage, I live with it every day," Riki said quietly and then turned back towards the horizon and the seemingly endless desert before them. "Wanna know my secret?"

"Yes, I do. Please tell me." Cal would do anything to make this horrible anger go away.

"Don't hold it in."

"B...But Riki, I can't just throw a tantrum! I...I can't behave that way in front of others!"

"Others?" Riki lifted his hands and turned in a circle. "I don't see anyone here but you and me."

Cal looked around. "No, but...but how could I let it out here?"

"Scream."

"S...scream?"

"Yep. Like this." Riki again turned his back to Cal and let out a loud, long scream of rage that caused the few birds and animals in the area, that had gone unseen at that point, to scatter in fright.

Cal covered his ears, aghast, and when Riki turned back to him, the mongrel's face was flushed from exertion.

"You try it."

"Oh...no, I could never..."

"Scream, Cal. Scream at the men that hurt you. Scream at Bean for betraying you. Scream at me for taking you all the fuck the way out here and making you face this."

Cal could feel the unease knotting inside of him, and the anger boiling over the top of it. He had been so badly hurt, so badly used in a way that no Furniture should ever be used. He could handle beatings, he'd gotten a severe one from Master Iason when he had first started, but after that the only other time was when he had attacked Bean unnecessarily.

He suddenly felt anger at that as well, for having to be punished for something that Bean had caused. Why had he been the one to be punished? Why had Bean sold him to a brothel when Cal had only tried to respect Bean's position there? Why did he have to deal with the aftermath of what had happened to him while Bean got away scot free? He didn't know where Bean was and he didn't care except for the fact that he would never get to face his nemesis, never force Bean to go through what he had been through, and then that ungracious and unforgiving thought made him even angrier because he was not a vengeful person.

"Let it out," Riki whispered as he watched the full turmoil of emotions running across the former Furniture's face. He nudged Cal deliberately, then lightly shoved him forward.

Cal spun around. "Stop it."

"Why? What are you gonna do about it?" He shoved Cal again and the young man toppled over onto his ass in the dirt.

"Riki!" Cal scrambled up. "Stop this, I mean it!"

“Make me.” Riki lightly swatted Cal in the head. “What are you gonna do, Cal? You just gonna take it?” He poked Cal’s chest, hard. “Wimp. Reject. Piss ant.” Riki was ready for the fist that came flying at him, and easily blocked it. He then blocked the next two as well as the kick that Cal attempted.

“Stop it! Don’t touch me!” Cal cried and lashed out at Riki again. “You have no right! You have no right!”

Riki continued to defend himself, startled when Cal landed a blow to his midsection, which aggravated his injured rib, he dropped to his knees. “Ooof.”

Seeing Riki go down seemed to calm Cal’s rage almost instantly. “No! Oh, I’m sorry. I’m so...” Cal’s breath rushed out as Riki grabbed the boy’s legs and knocked them out from under him.

“You’re quicker than I thought,” Riki grunted as he held Cal down to the ground. “But *now* what are you gonna do?”

“Let me go!”

“No.”

“Let me go, Riki!”

“No.”

“GET OFF ME!” Cal screamed suddenly, surprising himself and feeling just the slightest release of pressure in his chest. Panting with rage and frustration he held Riki’s dark gaze and then suddenly released a cry similar to the desperation of a wounded animal. Then another, and another until his voice grew hoarse and he found he was no longer laying on the ground but sitting with his back against Riki with the mongrel’s arms wrapped around him.

“Again,” Riki murmured.

Cal screamed again, and one more time, long and loud and clear until he finally felt an odd sort of pop go off inside of him. His shaking slowly ebbed, his anger faded and he realized, for the first time in over a week, he didn't feel...shame.

His scream echoed then faded into the distance as they sat there in the dirt, staring at the sky and silence fell around them. It worked, he thought in wonder. Somehow the tension and fear and humiliation that had been boiling up inside of him was no longer there.

"How do you feel?" Riki asked.

"Better," Cal admitted and found it surprising that his words were true. "I... feel better." He felt Riki relax behind him, so much that Riki's arms slipped away and he heard, rather than saw Riki thump flat on his back on the ground.

"Thank fuck."

"Um..." Cal slowly turned and stared at the mongrel laying in the dirt. "How do you feel?"

"Relieved it's finally out." Riki slowly sat up again, winced as the action pulled more at his rib. "I couldn't have fought you off much longer." He rubbed his midsection. "I can't believe you landed a punch."

Cal felt a tinge of remorse and started to apologize, but Riki met his eyes, as if he knew what the boy was going to do, and silently warned against it. He rose and offered Riki his hand. "I thought you were the best fighter in Ceres?"

"I'm sick!" Riki reminded, snatching his hand away from Cal's, once he was on his feet, then he lightly nudged the boy out of his way. "I didn't expect a Furniture to be able to fight worth shit, either."

"Former Furniture," Cal reminded as he dusted off his slacks and started walking behind Riki. "And we are trained in multiple forms of combat."

“In case the pets revolt?”

“In case an intruder gains entry to the home and attempts to injure our Masters.”

“Huh.”

Cal stopped suddenly as he wondered if had not tried hard enough to fight the men that had hurt him. Was it because there had been three of them, or was it the shock of waking up in such a place that had rendered him incapable of defense?

“No way!”

Cal’s head shot up, startled that Riki might be responding to his thoughts, but the mongrel was looking towards something to the left of them in one of the few, scattered groups of foliage. “What is it?”

Riki stepped forward and crouched down, snapping his fingers. “Hey. Is it really you? Come here.”

Cal tilted his head, curious and then saw a creature, green with silver and black spots and huge yellow eyes peek out from under one of the plants. “What is it?”

Riki continued to click his fingers. “Come on. Do you remember me? Come on, it’s okay.”

The six-legged lizard slinked fully into view and the sun sparkled off the cropping of fur atop its head. He reared up suddenly on its four hind legs and Cal stepped closer to Riki.

“Be careful, I think it’s going to charge!”

It did charge, in a preposterous looking gait that ran towards them, then stopped just short of Riki and extended its long snout, curiously.

Riki carefully reached forward and rubbed the lizard’s head. “You made it,” he said and felt a spark of something warm inside of him. “You didn’t die.”

When Iason had bought the creature for him and he had released it into the wild he'd not held much hope that the lizard would survive. There were some very dangerous animals that roamed the desert in the night time, and all of them would be bigger than the little baby lizard. Riki had not realized that it would grow so big; almost three feet in length, and it such a short amount of time.

The lizard, liking the unusual touch moved closer so that Riki could caress its long scaly body and lifted its lidless eyes towards Cal, as if demanding the same.

"It's okay, he won't bite you," Riki said, reasonably sure of the fact.

Cal slowly crouched down, careful not to startle the creature, and reached his hand forward. "He feels, rubbery. It's so strange and he's so big! I've never seen a creature like it."

"Yeah. I forgot to ask what it was called when we got it."

"When you got it?"

Riki quickly explained about the purchase and then release of the lizard. "I can't believe he survived. I was sure he was gonna die."

"Then why did you leave him out here? Why didn't you take him home with you?"

Riki looked at Cal, meaningfully. "One pet in that house is enough."

"Ah. I see. So you wanted it be free." Whereas, Riki could not be. Cal nodded. "I think it was a very noble gesture."

"He's so big!" Riki ran his hand down the full length of the lizard's body. "Those must have been just babies that guy was selling." His hand snatched back in surprise as a long black tongue suddenly zipped out and caught a bug that was passing by. Riki laughed. "Holy shit! Did you see that? He just snatched that thing out of midair! I didn't even see it!"

Cal almost smiled, pleased to see Riki happy. “I suppose that’s why his eyes are so large, to see his prey better than we can.” Cal pulled his hand back, not as trusting with the reptile as Riki seemed to be. “You said he was a baby when you got him? When was that?”

“Just a couple of weeks ago. How did he get so big?”

Cal thought about it. “I have read that there are some species of amphibians that grow faster when exposed to direct solar energy.” Cal glanced up at the unforgiving sun above them. “Perhaps he just needed to be exposed?” Cal pulled out a small sensor badge and took an image of the creature. “We can check when we get back.”

“Yeah.” Riki wondered if the vendor who had sold the lizards kept them in those small boxes deliberately, so they would stay small and easy to take care of and sell? He tentatively put the tip of his finger to the lizard’s mouth and was tickled when he received a split-second lick. “So cool. You are so cool, little guy.”

“Riki?” Cal said as he rose and glanced towards the sun. “You said you wanted to be back by lunch, so we should probably go.”

“Oh.” Riki looked at his watch and felt himself filled with disappointment. “Yeah, we’ve got another stop to make too.” He rose and the lizard skittered back a few paces, then turned to watch. “I’ll come back another time. Stay alive, okay. I’ll bring a whole bag of bugs for you.”

The lizard cocked its head and flicked its tongue.

“I think that means he accepts your offer,” Cal said as they started back towards the road. “Where else do we need to go?”

“You’ll see.” Riki passed Cal the second helmet then pulled on his own. He slid onto the bike, started it and waited for Cal to climb on. “Hey, Cal.”

“Yes?”

“You do feel better, right?”

“I do.” Not completely normal of course, but Cal supposed that would take time. “For now, at least. Thank you, Riki.”

Riki snapped down his visor and revved the bike to move forward. “Sure.”

Katze stretched in his chair and finished up his fourth cup of coffee, as his terminal beeped. “Go away,” he muttered. He’d been working nonstop and now he finally had everything the way it needed to be to make an early run for it, and start his vacation, before Raoul could catch him up again.

When his terminal beeped again he sighed and switched on the viewer to see Kaminx was waiting on hold. He switched on the receiver. “Talk.”

“LeBeau!” greeted the jubilant woman. “Where *have* you been? I’ve left so many messages!”

“I apologize, my lady, I was away unexpectedly and am now trying to catch up.”

“Oh?” Kaminx’s eyes flashed merrily. “A flight of fancy? Was it a woman or a man? Or both? Please tell me it was both? I’m so jealous!”

“Neither could possibly compare with your beauty, my lady.”

Kaminx grinned cheekily. “You are a smooth talker, LeBeau, that is why I get so worked up when I don’t hear from you often.”

“I have missed your dulcet tones as well,” Katze responded, accepting the tongue-in-cheek flattery mixed with a mild scolding as she was one of his best customers.

“I don’t mean to bother you further, I know you’re insanely busy, but I was wondering if you had managed to attain the products I requested?”

“They are on their way as we speak. You should receive them within three days.”

“You are a wonder.” The woman smiled and batted her lashes. “And the other request?”

“I regret that I must, again, decline your offer. I am quite happy with my current employer.”

Kaminx had been trying for several years to convince him to go work for her on New Earth, and it became routine for her to ask every now and then. She was not aware of the politics of Amoï and that he was the property of a Blondie, or that he was incapable of sexual relations. While he often deployed charm and flirtation in his dealings, with both men and women, he suspected that even if he could accept her offer, she might eat him alive!

Kamnix pouted. “You always say that, but he obviously works you too hard.”

“I enjoy hard work.” Another message alert blinked on his screen. “And I regret I must get back to it. If you are unsatisfied with your product in anyway please let me know.”

“Is my satisfaction truly important to you?”

“Of course.”

“Then come work for me.”

Katze allowed her a smile. “Now my lady, you know should I ever accept your request neither of us would get any actual work done.”

She beamed at him and then laughed. “You’re such a tease!”

“I really must go.” He smiled again. “Have a good day.” He ended the transmission then clicked on the new message from Flicka2 who advised that the hard to find commodity Katze had been looking for had been found. He typed a reply

Price?

Flicka2's response was equally curt. ***Twenty.***

Fifteen?

No. Firm.

Fifteen and trade?

Standby.

Katze finished up some paperwork as he waited for Flika2 to respond. Most of his contacts were code named, real names and locations were never divulged when dealing in the black market. The product he had requested had been more of a myth than reality, but Katze was sure if it was real it could be found. Now his instinct had been proven correct.

Finally, Flika2's name response appeared. ***Accepted.***

Katze typed his reply. ***Cost?***

Boy. Aged ten.

Katze sat back and stared at the screen. Child trafficking was often a compromise used when dealing in illegal commodities. While it would just be considered the price of business here on Amoï, and many other places, Katze had managed to avoid selling off a child that might have to deal with the same sort of man his father had been. Dealing with pets were different, most were bred for the position, or volunteered out of desperation to escape the slum. Still, it had taken him almost three years to locate this product and Jason would be very angry and disappointed if he screwed the deal.

Done. There was very little that bothered Katze, either physically or mentally, but he felt his stomach cramp with nausea as he hit the send key. He waited, as he assumed Flicka2 was checking with his source, then a reply appeared on screen.

Agreed. Delivery in one week. Usual place?

Yes. Katze signed off and tried to shake away the heaviness that overcame him, but before he could be left to his misery his watch communicator beeped. He glanced at it and saw Fanfic3112 was calling. With a sigh, he activated the two-way viewer. “What?”

“Bad day?” the caller asked, curious. “Christ, man it’s still morning!”

“Yeah, lucky me. What do you want?”

“You called me, remember?”

“Oh, yeah, right.” Katze ran a hand over his face. “I’m going to be away for a week, can you manage my calls and messages? If there’s anything urgent send it to me, but it better be life or death.”

The caller grinned. “Kaminx might die if she can’t reach you for a week, does that count?”

“I’ve just talked to her so she should survive that long.”

“Are you off to find a new product?”

“No, I...I’m going on vacation.”

“You?” Fanfic3112’s reaction was one of shock. “You’ve never taken persona time in...well...ever!”

“First time for everything. Sam is taking care of the office, but you’ll handle all communiques for me.”

“Going anywhere special?”

“I haven’t decided.”

“I have property in Diedo, you’re welcome to stay there if you like?”

“Is it near the water?”

“Yes, right on it almost. You could swim every day.”

“No thanks.”

Fanfic3112 laughed. “Have I found something you’re actually afraid of?”

“I’m not afraid of it, I just don’t see the point in submerging myself in something that houses giant creatures that could swallow me whole.”

“Come on, those things never come that close to shore.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Well, where are you going then?”

“Around and if I don’t leave now I won’t be going.”

“Got it. I’ll take care of things. Have fun.”

“Maybe. Out.” Katze ended the conversation then put his watch on Do Not Disturb and quickly forwarded all future messages to Fanfic3112 from his terminal. He closed and secured his cabinets, Sam would have access to only what he needed to run the office.

Finally, he grabbed his jacket, locked his office door then headed down the stairs to exit the building. He stepped outside and quickly secured the premises, then turned as two riders on an air bike pull up. Normally he would reach for his side arm, but he recognized the bike as Riki’s.

He coded the final lock, pulled out two cigarettes and lit them both. “What’s happened?” he demanded as he walked towards the bike, and watched the two passengers get off.

“Where’s my smokes?” Riki asked as he pulled off his helmet.

“You came all the way here to ask me that?”

Riki accepted the cigarette that Katze offered. “Yes, and something else.”

“They’ll be here by morning, I told you they were a special order. I’ll have them delivered. “Now, go away, I’m officially on vacation.”

“Vacation? You get vacation?”

“Apparently.” Katze glanced behind Riki to the passenger who was still wearing a helmet. “Who’s this?” When Cal pulled off the helmet Katze could not hide his surprise. “Cal?” He’d lost weight again, too much fucking weight.

“Hello Katze,” Cal greeted quietly and decided to hold the helmet in front of him, almost like a barrier than hang it on the bike as Riki had done. “I hope you are well?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Yeah, yeah, we’re all great,” Riki said as he walked back towards Katze’s office. “We need to talk.”

“About what?” Katze demanded.

“Stuff.” Riki glanced at the security panel. “You wanna open it, or should I?”

Katze inhaled deeply on his cigarette and smirked. “You’re welcome to try.” Katze had designed the security system, it had multiple layers and fail safes; there was no way even Riki was getting passed it.

Riki shrugged, reached into his jacket and pulled out his snap-kit of tools. “Okay then.”

Katze looked at Cal, who was still standing by the bike and as stiff as a board, and tried to make him relax by starting a conversation. “He’ll never do it.”

“I’ve found that Riki is capable of doing anything he has set his mind to.”

“He’s good, damn good, but I’m better.” He was glad that Cal at least seemed capable of having a proper conversation now. Perhaps being back at

Iason's was just what the kid needed, though he was still too thin. "There's no way he'll get thr..."

"We going in or not?" Riki asked as he pulled open the door of Katze's building.

Katze's cigarette dropped out of his mouth and he just barely caught it to keep from burning himself. "How the fuck?" he demanded, storming over to the door.

"I bypassed the Serial modulator with a low wave circuit beam."

"No way. The system is designed to go off if there's any sign of an additional heat or energy signature."

"Sure, but that's only if you haven't already turned off the tunnel regulation."

Katze studied the open security panel which Riki had left exposed during his work. "I used K-6 wiring and a grade 3 camouflaging unit. How did you know where it was?"

"Oh come on," Riki taunted as he slid his tools back into his pocket. "Every grade-schooler knows that if you expose the camouflaged unit to cold it details the actual specs."

Katze glanced at him. "But where did you...?" He was stunned when Riki held up a very small, thin spray can of cryogenic mist, which was highly illegal. "Where did you get that? Does Iason know you have it?"

"No, why, you gonna tell him?" Riki waved to Cal. "Come on, let's go inside before we draw a crowd."

Katze watched as Cal lowered his head, and followed Riki inside. For a brief instant, he thought he saw the beginnings of a smile on the former Furniture's lips, and to him that was worth Riki trashing his security system. He slammed the panel shut stepped in and slammed the door behind

him. He found Riki already making himself at home in the upstairs office by ordering three coffees from the food processor machine.

“You like it black, right?” Riki asked as he handed a mug to Cal then programmed another.

“Why are you here, Riki, and talk fast because now I have to rewire my fucking system.”

“Nah you don’t.” Riki walked over, handed Katze a steaming mug. “The mist wears off within a few minutes and I didn’t damage the system, I just bypassed it. It will still work when you leave.”

“What’s the point if anybody can get past it?” Katze snapped as he dropped down his desk chair, lit another cigarette and took a sip of his coffee. Cal, he noticed remained standing by the window, the farthest away from both of them, still holding the helmet in front of him with one hand and his cup of coffee in the other.

“Hey!” Riki puffed on his cigarette and settled down on the small sofa facing Katze. “I’m not anybody.”

That was true enough, Katze thought, without a trace of bitterness. He really wanted to get out of here before something else happened or someone else showed up, like Raoul, to prevent him from making his escape. “What do you want?”

“Have you heard anything about a...ah...change in my status recently?”

“No. Should I have?”

“I don’t know. I’m not even sure what it means really, that’s why I’m here.”

“I don’t have the power to change anything so why...?”

“I need you to tell me what it means.”

“What what means?”

“My new designation.”

“Fine, I’ll bite.” Katze inhaled, then tapped the ash off his cigarette into a dish. “What’s your new status?”

“Ah...well...it’s...” Riki stumbled, embarrassed and so Cal said it for him.

“Prince High Consort to Iason Mink.”

Katze blinked once, then again. “I beg your pardon?”

“Yeah,” Riki nodded miserably. “That was kind of my reaction too.”

Katze sat forward. “Prince High Consort?”

“Yeah.”

“Consort, as in mate or spouse?”

“Uh huh.”

“To Iason Mink? You’re...what Iason’s...” Katze struggled to say the word, as it was so rarely used in their society. “Husband?”

“I think so,” Riki said. “I don’t know. I’m not really sure what it means. Jupiter decided it, she also made me a technician, which is cool, but this other thing. I’m really not sure what it means or what they expect me to do with it.”

Katze sat very still for a long moment, then rose and walked to the window. He stared out, then turned and walked back. Sat down, stood up, sat down again and pulled open a drawer on his desk. “Hang on.” He pulled out a bottle of hard liquor and a glass, then poured himself a generous helping. He swallowed it down, then set the empty glass on the desk, straightened his tunic and turned back to Riki and Cal. “What the fuck?”

Cal again hid another smile by taking a sip of his coffee.

“That’s what I said!” Riki insisted.

“So...you’re not a pet anymore?” Katze began, running his forehead and trying to comprehend what had happened. This was unheard of, completely and utterly nuts! What was Jupiter thinking? “You’re a tech and a...a...”

“Prince High Consort,” Cal offered helpfully.

“Stop saying that!”

Cal jumped in surprise when both men ordered it simultaneously. “S... sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry,” Riki amended. “I didn’t mean to snap. This is all just seriously freaking me out.”

“Freaking *you* out?” Katze muttered. “Do you have any idea how much chaos this is going to cause. People hate you, Riki, no offence, but the Elites, especially. They are not going to take this news well.”

Riki hadn’t had a chance to ask how Iason’s brothers had taken the news, but now it was a cause to be worried. “I know. Do you think Jupiter did it to punish me and Iason somehow?”

“Punish you?”

“Yeah. I mean, me being a pet has caused a lot of trouble for everyone, and then Iason almost got killed, or actually did get killed, and then there was the whole thing with Orphe and then we got kidnapped. I can’t help but wonder if this is Her way of ostracizing Iason even more.”

“Iason is the favored son, basically Jupiter’s right arm. I can’t see Her deliberately doing something that would cause him grief.”

“Just me, then?”

“Maybe not.” Katze poured another tumbler full and handed it to Riki as he picked up his cigarette and puffed thoughtfully. “Maybe She is trying to be helpful and assumes everyone will just obey Her decision.”

“Which would be great if that were true.” Riki took a sip of the liquid and let it burn all the way down his throat, offering some relief from the knot that had formed there. “I mean they obey to an extent, but in the day to day things I still get attacked and sneered at.”

“Hmmm.” Katze scratched his head. “I’m not sure why you came to me with this, I have no other information. I’m as much in the dark about it as you are.”

“I know, but you know people. You’ve lived among the Elite’s longer than me. I don’t want this to become another issue between Iason and everyone else.”

“So what do you want from me?”

“Advice! How to handle this? I mean, if I’m not a pet does that mean I’m not just regulated to the pet parlors and other certain areas of Eos? Does it mean I can go into a restaurant that doesn’t serve pets, like, by myself? Does it mean I still have to listen to those fucking security cops whenever the hassle me?”

“I honestly have no idea, Riki. I’m sorry, I wish I could advise you but this...this has never been done. Yeah, I’ve lived among the Elites but it was mostly as Furniture and so I was naturally accommodating and submissive. You can’t be that, so...” Katze’s words trailed off.

“Oh. I thought you’d know more. You seem to know everything about everyone.”

“I didn’t know you could break my security system so easily,” Katze retorted dryly and watched Riki grin. He glanced at Cal, who had remained quiet the last little while. “What do you think?”

“I have no opinion on the matter.”

“You should, you’re his teacher, right? So, teach! Help him learn what this is all about.”

Cal set his nearly untouched coffee down. "I have never heard of such an event either, so why do you think I can help?"

"Because I may know everything about everybody, but you know more about protocol and policies and a lot of other things."

"That's true." Riki finished off the whiskey in his glass, and his cigarette and stood to walk over to Cal. "If Katze can't figure this out, you can."

"Were you not going to discuss this with Jupiter?"

"Maybe, but I'd rather figure it out on my own. Makes me seem less stupid in front of Her."

"I got news for you, Riki," Katze said, also rising. "Involving two other people is not doing it on your own."

"You know what I mean!"

"I...I suppose I could reference other cultures," Cal offered, thoughtfully. "Although we tend to do things very different here than in other places."

"Sure, but that's a start, right?"

Riki nodded. "It's a good start. I trust Cal to find out everything I need to know."

"But, I may find nothing at all!" Cal insisted.

"You will." Riki decided then suddenly turned to Katze. "How many packs of smokes did you get me?"

And they were back to that. Riki's thought process was sometimes bewildering. "I got you three cartons," Katze replied.

Riki's eyes widened. "Cartons? How many packs in a carton?"

"Ten, but I meant what I said, you can't smoke them as often as you do your regular ones, Riki. They're really strong and Iason will have a fit!"

“Katze!” Riki suddenly threw his arms around the taller man. “Dude, you’re my man!”

“I’m Iason’s man!” Katze snapped and shoved Riki away, despite the fact that the mongrel’s behavior amused him. “Get off! And this delivery better last you at least a year or you’re not getting anymore.”

“Sure, sure.” Riki was sure he’d have them gone in three months. He tossed Katze his bike keys. “She’s yours.”

“For how long?”

Riki pretended to consider it. “To start, three days, but if you want to borrow it any time after that, you can,” he grinned and added cheekily. “At least until I run out of smokes.”

Katze thought about what a release and thrill it would be to ride the bike in the open air, far away from Raoul, work and everyone in between. No one would suspect he would be on it, and if Raoul was still having him tracked they would be tracking his vehicle and not Riki’s air-bike.

He held out his hand. “Deal.”

Riki shook it and plucked the spare helmet away from Cal. “Not a scratch,” he warned. “And we’ll need a transport back to Eos.”

Katze turned to his terminal. “Done.” He tossed Riki the keys to his own vehicle. “We’ll trade them out when I get back.”

“Sound’s good.” Riki started to throw the keys to Cal, and then thought he might try driving it himself. Perhaps with his new designation the vehicle security would allow it; and if not he’d just bypass the damn thing as he had before. He slid the keys in his jacket pocket. “Where are you going on vacation?”

“Away.” Katze walked over to a wall panel and pressed his hand to it. The wall slid open to reveal a long supply closet. “Wait here a minute.” He

disappeared inside, then came back a moment later with several small boxes. He walked over to Cal and handed them to him. "Do me a favor?"

"Of course," the boy responded. "Did you wish these delivered somewhere?"

"No, I need you to do a taste test."

"Taste test?" Cal set the boxes on the desk and opened one to reveal colorful candy inside.

"They're a new commodity we might be selling, these are samples. I need to know which ones taste good and which ones don't. In other words, which ones will sell."

Cal's stomach knotted at the thought of food. He looked at the candies then back at Katze. "I'm not a judge of..."

"It would really help me out." Katze assured. "I hate sweets, and most of the men I have working for me aren't used to them either, so we need someone who understands flavor."

"Yes, but..."

Riki plucked one of the candies out of the box and plopped it in Cal's mouth, he understood what Katze was doing and was pleased by it. "Well?"

Cal stared at both of them, wide-eyed before starting to chew. He expected to feel the urge to throw it up, as he had all other food he'd tried, but as he bit into it, a tart and tangy liquid spurted across his tongue. He was so startled he forgot to feel afraid. "Ah...it's tart."

"No good?"

"No, I..." Cal felt his mouth water for the first time in almost a week at the idea of eating. "I don't think it's bad really."

"Maybe try another one then?" Katze suggested, helpfully. "To know for sure? Each row is a different flavor and each box holds different kinds."

“Um...well, yes, I suppose to be sure.” Cal slowly picked out the same candy and ate it. “It’s tart but it a nice way. It makes my mouth water, and I think there’s a trace of citrus in it.”

“So we can mark that one as a go?”

“I...well, if someone likes tart candies, I suppose it would be okay.”

“Great.” Katze pulled out a list. “These are the names of them, they’re marked by color and rows. Let me know which ones are best and which ones are shit for when I get back.”

Eat them all, Katze demanded silently as he watched a bit of colour finally leak into Cal’s cheeks. If the kid couldn’t eat regular food, for whatever reason, Cal would at least try to eat the candies because Katze had asked him to. Cal would look at it as a duty now and maybe he could put on some weight finally.

“I’ll do my best.” Cal offered the box to Riki. “If Riki helps me.”

“Can do.” Riki selected a different candy, sucked in his breath and then shuddered slightly. “No. Not that one.” He would have spit it out but he’d already swallowed it, so he grabbed one of the tart ones that Cal had tasted. His face puckered up from the mixture of the two flavours but the tangy taste got rid of most of the bad flavour from the first candy. “You’re on your own!”

Cal actually smiled at Riki’s reaction and did not notice how still the other two men went at the sight of it. “As you like.”

“Okay, everybody out,” Katze ordered, picking up the spare helmet again and moving to the door. “I’ve got things to do and places to go.”

“So rude!” Riki grinned but obeyed. “You crash my bike I’ll fucking castrate you.”

“Too late!” Katze returned as Cal stepped out and he secured the door.

Notes for the Chapter:

Congrats to Kamix, Fanfic3112 and Flika2 for guessing correctly (On their first guess anyway :-))) Not to worry, Carrie will be coming up very soon for those who miss her and Raoul and Anjell will also be making an appearance. Please be patient, as I did say most of this story would be centered around Riki and Iason.

To make up for the delay of posting last week, I'm uploading an extra long chapter again for you now. Please keep in mind that the next chapter will be a week from now and I will try to keep it to that time frame as often as I can for future chapters. Writing Cal now is difficult and heart wrenching, considering what I have put him through, but I don't believe his recovery would be immediate, noy even in this Dystopian world. I hope you understand and approve of the way I am writing his story. Thanks to everyone for being so understanding and supportive and don't forget to review!

Chapter 21

Summary for the Chapter:

Riki invites a friend for dinner and Iason's hard work starts to pay off. ANGST warning, tissues recommended as I made MYSELF cry at one particular moment - can anyone guess which part? :-)

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks so so much for those of you that reviewed or left Kudos!! This story seems to have taken on a life of it's own, as the others did, but I am trying (somewhat unsuccessfully) to curb the inspiration as I didn't intend to make this another twenty or thirty five chapter deal! I know that you want it to go on forever, but logically I have to stop somewhere. :-)

Anyway, hope you enjoy this latest installment and if you so, you KNOW what to do! :-) Hoping everyone has a very, very Happy Easter!

Iason pushed away from the terminal where he had been going over hundreds of new reports on recent imports and exports, as well as complaints and issues within the organizations. He had not even been gone for a week and once again people tried to avoid paying their monthly dues or tried importing forbidden items without the required 'omission tax' to bring it into Amoï. There were few items that were actually forbidden here, most were simply deemed illegal.

That was why they had a Black Market and why he was the head of it. Everything could be purchased for a price, and as long as the buyer was willing to pay his price, he would look the other way to allow the goods through. It had been almost two decades now that one of the Syndicate's off world business associates had complained about how the black market on their planet was taking over their goods and services contracts. So much

illegal contraband was flowing into their docks that they simply didn't have the manpower to stop it.

Iason had never heard of such a thing, for if an item was forbidden on Amoï there was absolutely no way to smuggle it in, not only because of their tight security but because no one would dare think of going against the Syndicate rules. Or so he believed. However, after some checking Iason found that there were a few people that had managed to bring in off planet goods and he was astonished that they had even tried; for being caught with such goods carried a very severe sentence.

Instead of eliminating the small team of smugglers, he studied them and learned that there was a rather large market for illegal items, even if only a few of them managed to find their way through Amoï's security protocols. It was not only Humans that were attempting to smuggle things either, but even some of his own kind. It made sense to him that such a market could be better utilized than just shutting the smugglers down and imprisoning them, he would take advantage of their greed. This way he would also maintain control over what products were coming in and he would have a record of who had what items, in case there was an incident. Controlled Chaos was, after all, the best way to deal with management of a species.

Thus, when he had found Katze breaking into the computer files in his office, he knew that he had found the perfect person to help him create this new, hidden level in the Syndicate. Katze quickly developed a talent for the procurement and resale of illegal goods and was very good at keeping his business off the radar, thus proving that Iason's choice of using him as a front man was ideal. Katze was no longer registered as Furniture. He had been released from service, or so the records showed, and most assumed that he was resentful of his former Master, because that was just how Katze played it. In reality he still belonged to and continued to work for Iason, and they had a solid and trusting relationship. Iason knew that Katze would never betray him and considering the people that Iason worked and interacted with daily, that trust was very rare and valuable to the Blondie.

Occasionally Katze would visit Iason, but most assumed that the former Furniture was simply using Iason to glean information on the goods he desired. No one suspected that Iason Mink, the head of the Syndicate, was

also the one behind Katze and the black market, and this also helped to strengthen Katze's reputation. Anyone who could put one over on a Blondie had to be good.

The only people who knew of their current connection was Jupiter, who had agreed with his scheme, Raoul because Iason trusted him, and Riki, because he had worked with Katze at one time. On the surface, Katze was simply a businessman, in charge of specialized importing and exporting, and while Iason knew that a few of his kind suspected Katze of trading illegally they could never find any proof of it. Katze was too good at hiding his tracks, and even while he gained a reputation for procuring hard to find items, no one ever connected him to illegal trades.

Katze did most of his transactions online, and used a software that changed his voice and appearance while broadcasting. After the deal was made, all communications were overwritten or deleted from the system. If traders insisted on a meet in person to exchange product, he had a handful of people who would go on his behalf and drop the items at a predetermined location, which would then be picked up by someone else. But even these people did not know who he really was or what he looked like.

A few people, perhaps irritated that Katze had denied their requests, had tried to come to Iason about it, but again without proof, Iason refused to believe it. After all, Katze had once been his Furniture and how dare they speak in such a way about one of his previous Furnitures. That was a deliberate insult to his own intelligence and judge of character.

He smiled at the devious intricacies of it all. There were still some things that even Katze knew better than to try for. Certain types of literature, video files and music were forbidden because it was a concern that such things might have an adverse affect on the Human population of Amoï, especially those in Ceres. Anything that might instigate a revolution, or educate the Humans against the type of Dystopian life that was their fate.

Reengineering the Human's genetics so that most females would only give birth to boys had been one way to weed out possible aggression and future revolt; for it had been proven in Human history that the female was always an instigator of change, or the one thing men fought for. While they could

not do away with all females, limiting the number born every year was an alternative to complete annihilation of the species. And if a female was born, once she became of age she was always placed with a high ranking official, far away from the other mongrels in Ceres.

A buzz caught his attention and he glanced up to see Gideon through his glass door. His jaw hardened but he rose and waved him inside. "Yes, Gideon?"

The Blondie stepped through. "I am not even to be offered a drink?"

"Would you like a drink?"

"No thank you."

Iason blinked, Gideon was such a strange Blondie, a constant contradiction and jokester sometimes and other times as cold and hard as any of them could be. "What can I do for you?"

"I wish to discuss he who cannot be named in your presence."

The amusement in Gideon's voice was apparent and Iason found himself annoyed by it. "What of him?"

"Raoul has completed the Phashing, as you requested."

"Fine." Iason moved to pour himself a cup of tea. "Anything else?"

"I am here to speak on his behalf, Iason, and this is not easy for me as you know I dislike bowing to anyone, especially another Blondie."

Iason returned to his desk, sat down and sipped his tea. "You've come to bow to me, Gideon?"

"I've come to ask you to forgive Issac for his error in judgement. Raoul did a good job with the mind wipe, he's removed most of Issac's memories, but now..."

"Now?"

Gideon dropped into the chair in front of Iason's desk. "He is like a newborn again, Iason, and he is not responding well to stimulation. We have all tried to take part in his recovery, but he will do nothing beyond some automated functions."

"Why come to me with this? Raoul did the wipe, discuss it with him..."

"Raoul does not have a reason for why this is happening!" Gideon slammed his hand on Iason's desk. "He claims that the wipe should not have interfered with his regular functions and brain activities. He should have been able to recover to normal parameters within a couple of days, but he has not."

"I am still unclear as to why this is my problem."

"Issac always responded better to you, Iason. Will it kill you to help him now, at least until he is on a more even keel? We cannot even get him to eat!"

"As Elites, we do not need to eat."

"It is part of our programming, to assimilate the traits of Humans and enjoy the same pleasures that they do. Eating, working and sleeping are all part of that and he cannot do any of it."

Iason deliberately set his tea cup on his desk, then turned back to his terminal. "Then shut him down."

Gideon stared at him, hard, then slowly rose. "You have always been a cold bastard, Iason, more so than the rest of us, but this is Issac we're talking about, your own brother!"

"Orphe was also my brother, and you saw what happened to him when he betrayed me."

Gideon actually took a step back, before moving forward again in recovery. "Issac has only ever been devoted to you, Iason, and for his devotion you

have robbed him of his memories of you and the rest of us. You have stolen his family from him!”

“Why Gideon, you’ve been spending too much time with those Humans you employ, you’re beginning to sound like them.”

Gideon slammed his hands on Iason’s desk in a rage, for there was no bigger insult than to compare an Elite to a Human. “You dare?”

“Issac will grow to know each of his brothers once again and all will be as it was. I’m surprised that you are trying to force the issue, and more, that you are attempting to blame me for what has been done. Have you forgotten that Issac was directly responsible for the blatant failure in our security?”

“I have not forgotten. His actions were foolish, regardless of what motivated them, but now he has paid your price. Why can you not forgive him?”

“Forgive him?” Because of Issac, Iason had almost lost Riki. If Carrie had not been there during their abduction Riki would have been lost to him forever. No, he would never forgive Issac, even though admitting unsettled him. “Why is this so important to you?”

“Because it is Issac!”

Iason stared at Gideon for a long, hard moment. “What will you give me in return if I help Issac to recover?”

Gideon’s eyes narrowed. “What do you want?”

“You know what I want. Will you do it?”

“What is your obsession with this damn law? What difference can it possibly make?”

“Will you do it or not?”

“I cannot speak for the others, we have been over this!”

“You are very persuasive, Gideon,” Iason returned. “I need only two more votes. If you get them for me I will help Issac.”

“You will go see him? Your word on it?”

“I will help Issac, I do not need to see him to do so.”

“Iason!”

“Take the deal or get out of my office and don’t bother me with it again.”

“Fine!” Gideon snapped. “I will hold you to your end of the bargain, Iason. If Issac does not improve, I will be very disappointed. Do not disappoint me.”

Most of the Blondies believed Gideon to be just a light hearted, albeit selfish Elite who rarely had time for anything or anyone that did not directly pertain to his own interests. However, Iason knew that behind Gideon’s easy-going façade lurked a mind that was darker, and deadlier than even Iason could admit to. Making an enemy of Orphe had been a risk, and both he and Riki had nearly lost their lives from it. An enemy like Gideon would allow for no escape, but Iason was still head of the Syndicate and so could not show that the threat bothered him.

He started typing on his keyboard, then glanced up at Gideon with ice in his eyes. “You may go.” Iason turned back to his terminal and heard the quiet click of his office door as Gideon left, impressed that the Blondie hadn’t slammed it.

He rose and walked to his transparent wall to look out over Eos. Gideon was wrong, it wasn’t easy for him to refuse to help Issac, but he had to maintain his distance. He had made his decision and if he went back on it now his enemies would perceive it as a weakness.

Returning to his desk, he remained standing as he picked up his tea and gave a voice command to display the Hospice wing and the room where Issac was staying. A moment later his monitor showed the Blondie sitting in

a chair by the window as one of the attendants attempted to get his attention. Issac never reacted, no matter what the attendant did.

“Increase view of patient’s face by thirty percent.”

The monitor complied and Iason studied the Blondie before him. Gideon said that all of Issac’s memories had not been removed, so he should still be fully functional, just with a significant gap in his memory. Even at a full reset, Blondies had the ability to speak, eat, walk, talk and all of the normal components from the moment they were activated. Issac should be able to do that and more, so why wasn’t he?

He noticed that when the attendant finally left there was a flicker of movement in Issac’s eyes and the response seemed very similar to what Iason would term sorrow. Did some component of his memory remain? Was the Blondie being deliberately unresponsive? He couldn’t go to see Issac, that was certain, but perhaps there was someone else who could? Someone else who might inspire the Blondie back on the road to recovery. It would have to be someone strong willed, and stubborn, but someone who also understood the respect that a Blondie required. Someone creative and persistent and willing to get their hands dirty. Someone a Blondie wouldn’t expect.

Very slowly he smiled, but before he could take action his wrist communicator beeped. His smile widened as he accepted the call and Riki’s handsome face came into view. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay. Did you talk to Jupiter?”

“I am sorry, Riki, I have been swamped all morning. I will put a request in right now...”

“No, that’s okay. I’ll figure it out.” Riki paused for a minute, as if reluctant to continue. “So, did you still want to have lunch?”

It surprised him that Riki actually remembered, more so that his beloved was willing to actually come to him so they could dine together, without

being forced. Yes indeed, things were changing for them. “Actually, I can’t get away right now, but I was wondering if you might do me a favour?”

Riki’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “What kind of favour?”

That was the Riki he knew and loved, Iason thought, amused. “Where are you right now?”

“Cal and I are shopping.”

Iason scowled. “Shopping for what?” He had wanted to take Riki shopping! He had wanted them to go together!

“Dinner ingredients. Cal said he’ll cook something really cool.”

“Ah, well, that is something to look forward to then.” Iason was still irritated that Riki would so easily go shopping with Cal and not him. He’d have to have a very long talk with his pet...consort, he corrected and a smile slowly spread across his face.

“What are you so happy about?” Riki demanded then glanced behind him, screwed up his face and shook his head. Iason heard Cal make a comment about nutrients and Riki’s response was “I don’t care, I’m not eating green slugs!”

“They’re Arati, not slugs! It’s a completely different species!”

“They look like slugs, and I ain’t eating it!” Riki turned his attention back to Iason. “Would you eat green slugs?”

“Certainly not!” Iason returned, playing along.

“There, see?” Riki said to Cal. “Even Iason says it’s disgusting!”

“I never said...” Iason began but the two began to argue and he settled in his chair to wait it out. He was beyond pleased that Riki seemed to have resurrected a piece of the old Cal, perhaps the boy was finally on the mend. He glanced at the time and interrupted. “Riki. Riki!”

“What?” Riki snapped looking at Iason finally.

“About the favour I need you to do?”

“Oh, yeah. As long as it doesn’t involve green slugs...”

“Arati!” Cal insisted from off camera and Iason watched Riki smirk. The mongrel was obviously provoking the younger boy on purpose.

“Whatever!” Riki turned his attention to Iason. “Okay, what do you want?”

What a loaded question, Iason thought amused, then quickly explained.

Riki made his way through the market place, passed the usual places where he purchased cigarettes, books and sweets, and wound his way through the multiple stalls. He ignored the calls from the other vendors promising fantastic, unbelievable wares. In his hands he carried a heated, hard cover sack.

No one stopped him on the way there, no one glared at him, or made a snide comment, and quite frankly it was making him nervous. A couple of security officers caught sight of him at one point, and started to make their way towards him, no doubt to harass him again, but they appeared to receive a communication over their wrist units at exactly the same time. He watched them review the message, readied himself to face them but instead saw shock and surprise in their eyes; then a flash of anger as they glared at him. They both turned away and he scratched his head, perplexed.

He finally made it to Carrie's stall, now in a prime location thanks to Iason's connections, and hopped over the counter before she could even say hello. “Lunch.” he offered as he settled on her stool and started taking the food out of the bag. “I didn't think I'd ever get here, the smell was driving me crazy!”

Carrie grinned, pulled out a second stool, that she has purchased because Riki was always using hers, and settled next to him as he set the still steaming containers on her back table along with two cold drinks. “Smells good.” She accepted the utensils he offered her. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I was hungry and in the area,” he returned, then glanced around her stall. “Anything new?”

“Not since our adventure away. I’ve ordered some new stock, should be in tomorrow.”

“I’ll come back tomorrow then.”

She pulled the lids off the containers to see detectable, juicy meats, mouthwatering vegetables and fluffy rice awaited them. “I heard you were sick?”

“Yeah, some kind of virus. I’m okay now.” He decided not to mention the spots which were underneath his clothes; luckily, they had stayed away from his neck and face and his jeans and jacket covered the rest. He stuffed some rice into his mouth, chewed quickly then reached for his drink.

“Hey! Slow down! If you choke to death Iason will skin me.”

“But you have such nice skin, especially when it's covered in fur.”

“Hair!” she snarled. “I do not have fur!”

He laughed and drank down half of his soda. “Actually, Iason wants you to come to dinner tonight.”

Carrie’s toes curled in her shoes in pleasure. It was so lovely to hear Riki laugh, and see him smile. It was also a thrill to feel as though she were part of a family again. Being the only one left of her kind became very lonesome.

“I really don't know, I have a very full schedule....”

“Bullshit, you're coming.” He finished off his food and rose to drop the empty container in the trash bin next to her stall. “Cal's cooking so it will be amazing, and you'll hurt his feeling if you don't show.”

“Now, I call bullshit. Cal doesn't seem to be the type to get his feelings hurt so easily, don't try and guilt me kid, I invented guilt.”

“You can't say no to Iason Mink.”

“*You* can't say no” She shrugged and shoved a mouthful of rice into her mouth. “I can say it all I like.”

Riki stared her down until she grinned and reached up to pat his cheek. “You're so cute when you're trying to get your way.”

“I am not cute!”

“Hey!” Carrie caught his arm as he finished off his soda and dropped that as well into the bin. “Don't you dare try to eat and run, pal. Sit.” She pulled him down until he was beside her again. “Now, tell me the truth. How are you, really?”

“I'm fine...”

“Riki! I put my life on the line to help you a very short time ago.”

Riki shifted uncomfortably. “I know, and I appreciate...”

“You *owe* me,” she reminded, using his own code against him.

“I know I do.”

“Then be honest with me. Talk to me. A lot happened to you lately, and you can't just be fine with it.”

She didn't know the half of it, she had no idea about his recent designation change. Riki felt a surge of discomfort and guilt. What did she expect from him? He wasn't used to talking about his problems, not to anyone. He'd

been sort of forced to do it with Jupiter, and they was only because he couldn't keep Her out of his head.

"You know you can trust me," she said softly.

"Yeah. I know. I mean, I do. Trust you."

"Then talk to me."

He rose again and shoved his hands into his jacket pockets. "What's the point of talking? Talking doesn't change things."

"That is not true. If we hadn't started talking we never would have become friends. If we hadn't been friends, I never would have tried to help you and Iason when you were abducted. If I hadn't tried to help you, you'd probably still be on Avalon in that awful tights and tunic and that horrific crotch cloth!"

Riki's lips twitched. "So, what you're saying is you rescued us single handedly?"

"I played my part as did everyone else and that was why you were able to return home. Because all the parts were in play to resolve the issue." She rose and dropped her hand on his shoulder. "I know talking isn't your strong point, with your vocabulary I'm not surprised."

"Shut up," he retorted but he knew she was just teasing him. He'd missed that kind of derisive taunting that he'd had with his gang. They insulted each other daily, but it was never in a mean way. He turned to her. "I know you're trying to help, but honesty, Carrie, I'm still trying to figure out how I feel about all of it."

"Okay." She nodded and stepped back, that was a start at least. "I completely understand that. I'm not trying to pressure you, I just want you to know that I'm here if you need me. Sometimes just talking to another person, hearing yourself say the problems out loud can make a huge difference in finding a resolution to them."

“Well, I’m good. Really.” Riki looked at the floor of the stall, scuffed his boot along one of the many worn scratches and cracks. He could probably fix that for her, it wouldn’t take much to buff out the scratches and seal the gaps, as he and Guy often had to do with that flat of his because there were no maintenance codes or droids in Ceres. Once a building started to deteriorate it was just left to do so.

“See, you’re doing it for me now.”

He glanced up at her startled. “Huh?”

“Ah, there’s that amazing vocabulary again.” Before he could respond she continued. “You’re thinking of a way to fix my booth floor, aren’t you?”

“It’s a bit of a mess,” he admitted looking down again. “I could...”

“No.”

He raised his gaze again. “No what?”

“No, don’t fix it.”

“Why not? It would only take...”

She waved her hand and settled back her stool to resume eating. “I’ll do it myself.”

“Do you know how to do it? Do you know what materials to use and...?”

“I’ll figure it out.”

“But, I can do it for you!”

She turned to him suddenly. “Why would you do that?”

“Because the floor is shit and needs to be fixed!”

“I’m the only one who sees it, so it’s fine.”

“It’s not fine! If the cracks get bigger your foot might get caught, or the whole thing could collapse which would throw off the angles of your displays and...”

“Then why should you do it?”

“Because I can...”

She turned away again. “I’ll hire someone, don’t worry about it.”

“Why would you hire someone when I can do it?”

“Why should you do it when I can hire someone?”

“Because I want it done right!”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want your stall to collapse on top of you!”

“So what of it does?”

“It can’t!”

She rose and faced him again. “Why not?”

“Because you have to safe!”

“It’s not your responsibility to make sure I’m safe.”

“It is!”

“Why?”

“Because I...” Riki’s mouth snapped shut as he realized what he had been about to reveal. Angry at being played he turned away and put a hand on the front counter to jump back to the other side, but Carrie caught him from behind and hugged him, hard.

“I love you too.”

Riki could feel the heat start from his toes and rise all the way up to his ears and the sudden, fierce pounding against his ribcage. “I never said that! I can’t...Iason...I belong to him and...”

“I don’t mean sexually, Riki. There are many types of love in this world and you should never, ever be ashamed to admit to even one of them.”

“W...why?” he asked, timidly. She still hadn’t released him, and his arms remained stiffly by his sides as he waited for an Elite or security or some other pet to see him being embraced and cause trouble for them both. “Please let go.”

Carrie stepped back. “Riki, Iason understands how I feel about you. He won’t get angry.”

“I...maybe but...”

Suddenly feeling shaky and winded, either from surprise or his rapidly beating heart, he dropped down on her stool again. He wasn’t used to anyone other than Iason touching him like that anymore, and it surprised him how much it had frightened him. He and Guy had hugged, occasionally the other members of Bison allowed a friendly, brotherly hug and back slap in greeting, but this embrace felt different. He didn’t become aroused from it, more like he leaned into it. Not like he did with Iason, which caused fire and passion, this was more warmth and something...something else that he couldn’t define. Something that made him feel inexplicably safe.

Carrie settled back on her spare stool and faced him. “I’m sorry if I upset you.” She hadn’t meant to push him so hard.

“I...Carrie, you know I can’t...” Riki chewed on his lower lip then finally lifted his gaze. “I’m not used to this. I’m not used to having...”

“Friends?”

“No, I’ve had friends before, back in Ceres.” But they never talked about their feelings or any real issues that troubled them. Talking about how shit your life was or how you felt about it was a sign of weakness. It was just expending air and making others pity you, and it never changed anything. “Talking, like that, isn’t easy for me. I don’t see the point. I know you’re trying to help, but...”

“I get it.” She patted the fist that his hand had curled into on his leg. “I won’t do it again. You can fix my floor and my stall and anything else you want to.”

He stared at the floor again, then back up at her as something dawned on him. This was a familiar feeling. It was one he’d had before, a long, long time ago, and a piece of it had come back to him when he had been on Avalon and holding the Queen. “I don’t dislike the way you talk to me, Carrie, the way you treat me. I’m just not sure how to react to it. I think...I think maybe I’m confused about my feelings about the Queen and...and all of that and maybe I’m...what’s the word...transferring some of that confusion onto you.” He ran his hand through his hair. “Sorry, that doesn’t make any sense.”

Carrie’s eyes grew moist and she had to blink several times as she discerned his meaning, even if he was not fully aware of what he’d just admitted to. “Do you know that when Iason and I were being held captive, and I helped him to escape, he asked me why I had tried to help you when you were being abducted.”

“Makes sense, I still don’t know either. What did you tell him?”

“I told him that one of the traditions of my people was to create a Pride. Most times that included your family, mother, father, siblings if there were any, but when my people started to be hunted, families became a luxury that few of us shared and so our Pride became people who helped us, who supported us...” She reached up and patted his cheek. “Who loves us and who we loved in return.”

“Um...okay.”

“I told Iason that you and he were both part of my Pride now, and that bond can never be broken. Not by you or me, not by the authorities of Amoï, not even by a Blondie.”

Riki’s eyes widened. “Really? Did he get mad.”

“No. He accepted it and thanked me for taking you both in.”

“What? Why?”

“Because, Riki, I think even Iason has finally realized that keeping you all to himself will not make you happy. You need to have friends, and people that you can count on. You need a family.”

“Is that what a Pride is? A family?”

“Yes, in a way.”

“So, you’re saying you’re my family and that Iason has accepted this?”

“Don’t misunderstand,” she said, seeing the flash of indignation in his dark eyes. “The people on Avalon that claim to be your real family forced that truth on you before you were ready for it. I am not forcing anything on you, I’m letting you know that in my eyes, you are someone I will always care for, always protect and can always turn to. You do not have to return those feelings, and nothing is expected of you.”

“Carrie, I...I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t need to say anything. I just wanted you to realize, in my rough and tumble way, that if you want to talk, I’m here. If you just want to fix my floor and haggle over my wares, I’m here. If you want to bring me lunch or forget you ever met me, I’ll still be here if you decide to come back to me.”

“So, I can accept it, or refuse it and walk away? And you won’t be mad?”

“No. I may be sad to see you go, but it’s your choice and I would respect it. I can’t make you feel something that you don’t want to, or aren’t ready to

feel any more than I can change the way I feel about you. The point is, whatever your decision, you would still be part of my Pride, in my heart and in my soul, and I will still be here for you.”

“Even if we never saw each other again?” he asked, quietly and felt his heart lurch at the thought, which also surprised him. He had never been one to tie himself to anyone, with the exception of Bison, and even then it had been ridiculously easy for him to walk away from all of them, including Guy, to search for a better life. People came in and out of his life and he accepted that without a second thought.

“Even if we never saw each other again, my feelings would still be the same. If we went a hundred years apart and you walked up to me one day, I would welcome you as my friend and as my Pride, without a second’s hesitation.”

“Even though I’m a pet of a Blondie? A mongrel of Ceres?”

“Who you are to someone else, who you were to others makes no difference. My choice is based on who you are to me, and to me you have always been a kind, and considerate young man who is very good, too good sometimes, at bargaining and extremely talented at fixing what I need fixed.”

Her simple confession was so alarmingly different, Riki realized, to the way the King and Queen and everyone had shoved their truth onto him. They had not hidden their revulsion at what he was, even as they badgered him with tales of who they claimed he should be. They had insisted that his old life meant nothing, that such a distasteful and awful life should just be forgotten. That who he was should just be forgotten, but he couldn’t because he had survived that life. He had become the person he was by living that life and they deemed the sacrifices he had made, the pain and torture and emotional turmoil that he had gone through to survive such a life as insignificant and worthless. That had been what had angered him the most, their complete ignorance and dismissal of his life on Amoï. To them, he was a Prince, and nothing else mattered. They didn’t care who he was, only what they expected him to be.

Carrie wasn't demanding he be anyone else, and she wasn't asking anything from him. She didn't care that he was a pet or a mongrel, but nor did she begrudge him for it. There was no deceit or subtle attempts to convert him into someone he wasn't. All she was offering was friendship, support and the freedom to accept it or refuse it.

"I don't like her."

Carrie blinked. "Who?"

"The Queen. Everyone says she's my mother, and I do remember certain things about her." More feelings and scents than actual memories he realized. "But I don't want to be her son."

"Why?" Carrie inquired softly. "Because you're angry with her for not accepting you for who you are? Or perhaps, for losing you?"

Riki's lower lip trembled at how close to the truth Carrie was. "Losing me?"

"She's your mother, and a mother is supposed to protect you. She should have looked harder for you. She should have somehow sensed that you were in danger. She should have saved you."

"No. I mean, I know it's not her fault, not really. They couldn't have expected those things to attack us, to abduct me and kill the King."

"Shouldn't she have?"

Riki felt his eyes well up and lowered them, appalled. "That doesn't make sense. How could she? How could anyone...?"

"It doesn't have to make sense, Riki." Carrie caught both of his hands and linked them with hers. "Emotions, strong ones like love and hate and fear almost never make sense."

"But I barely even remember her! How can I blame her when I don't really know her?"

“You *know* she is your mother,” Carrie said. “Memories aside, you can feel that part of the story is true.”

“But I don’t remember ever having a mother! It makes no sense to be mad when I never even considered having one.”

“Riki, everyone wants a mother. Everyone wants to know where they came from and who created them. Once you acknowledged her as your mother, of course all the other emotions were going to come out too.”

He stared at her, felt his emotions getting closer and closer to the surface and his ability to control them faltering. He lowered his gaze to their joined hands and found it difficult to compose himself. Because of this, he started speaking from his heart and could not seem to stop it. “I wish I’d never met her. I wish I’d never learned anything about her or the King or Avalon or any of it. I wish...” He lifted his gaze suddenly. “I wish *you* had been my mother.”

That did it, the tears that Carrie had been holding back flowed over and down her cheeks. “Oh sweetie.” It took her a moment to get the rest out. That was the nicest thing anyone had ever said to her. “I’m not your mother, but I am your friend, and I am someone you can talk to about anything, I promise.”

Riki nodded and allowed himself to be pulled into the second embrace. “I know. I do know that, Carrie.” His arms tightened around her. “I’m so glad I met you.”

“Me too.” She allowed the hug to continue for another few seconds, then pulled back as people were starting to stare. Quickly wiping the moisture from her face, she smiled at him. “Even if I did almost shit myself in front of your master.”

Riki almost smiled, but he pulled it back in as he remembered that technically, Iason was no longer his master. “About that,” he began. “Maybe there is something I could get your advice on.”

“Anything.”

Riki nodded and revealed his new designation.

Chapter 22

Summary for the Chapter:

Guy is avoiding Shiao and he wants to know why.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you everyone so so much for reviewing! Sorry for the delay in posting things here are crazy at the moment and do not show any sign of slowing down. I will endeavour to still post weekly, but please forgive me if I am a day or two behind. Please, please continue to review as it is what helps keep me inspired and thank you all for your wonderful support!

“Where is everyone?”

Guy turned from where he was stripping an engine and felt his heart speed up as he watched Shiao walk across the workroom floor. When had that started, he wondered, and deliberately turned back to table that held the engine to hide his suddenly warm face.

“I gave them the day off. We’re ahead of schedule and they had to work straight through while we were away.”

“I see.” Shiao moved closer to examined the loose parts scattered on the bench. “Is there a problem with this machine?”

“It keeps kicking out of gear when it gets above forty.”

“Odd.”

“Yeah. It seems to be working properly, but it’s still not accepting thrust past forty, so I figured I’d strip it down and find the problem.”

“Logical. You have remarkable skills, Guy.” Shiao stepped back and squeezed the mongrel’s shoulder. “I am very pleased with your work here.”

Guy flushed with pleasure and felt himself unconsciously lean back into the Onyx's touch, then realized what he was doing and quickly wrenched himself forward, knocking into the table and scattering some of the smaller pieces to the floor. "Shit!"

He dropped down and started gathering the bits before they could roll under any of the furniture or equipment, and as he reached for a small circular bolt Shiao's fingers collided with his and it was as if a spark of electricity seared through him. He snatched his hand back and ended up dropping the few pieces he had already gathered.

"Guy?" Shiao asked, quickly scooping up the dropped machine pieces. "Are you unwell?"

"No. I mean, yes. I mean, no, I'm not unwell. I'm fine, just fine."

Shiao straightened as Guy rose. "Are you sure? Your heartrate seems erratic and your body temperature has increased by..."

Guy turned away, flustered. "How do know what my body's doing?"

"As I advised earlier, I am able to perceive indirect changes in a Human's vitals."

"Yeah, well...don't."

"You are angry with me."

"I'm not."

"Is it Riki then? Has he contacted you and upset you?"

"No."

"There must be something..."

"I'm fucking fine okay!" Guy yelled and saw a flicker of hurt cross Shiao's usually stoic features. Damn it. It wasn't the Onyx's fault that he was suddenly thinking with his dick. He stepped forward, started to reach for

Shiao then changed his mind and let his hand drop. “I’m just going through some personal...stuff and I have to work it out on my own, okay? I’m not mad at you or anything. It has nothing to do with you.”

The last part was a lie that Guy couldn’t help but slip in. The two days they had spent in bed had been the most amazing sex that he had ever felt, and afterward he tried to pretend that he was okay with it, but once the thrill of it and worn off the doubts had set in.

The next night he had slept alone, as Shiao had needed to go off planet for business. The nightmares had been vivid and brutal, but he couldn’t even really call them dreams as they were based so much in truth. He dreamed of when Riki had confessed to being a pet and his reaction to it. The things he had said, the things he had done and the rage and betrayal he had felt all replayed itself in his subconscious state. He had hated Riki for allowing himself to become the pet of an Elite. He had been disgusted and enraged at the thought of Blondie touching the man he loved in such a way. His anger and absolute refusal to accept it had resulted in him castrating Riki and trying to kill them all.

A couple of years later and here he was, living with an Onyx, working for an Onyx, and now sleeping with an Onyx. It was the ultimate irony for what he had done. To have willingly put himself in the same situation, or at least a similar one, that he had criticized Riki for. In his dreams Riki walked in on him and Shiao having sex and pressed a detonator. The explosion had woken Guy from his dream, screaming, and behind his eyes the mongrel could still see pieces of the Onyx flying outward, his arm, his leg, his head. It had been terrifying.

When Shiao returned, Guy had been so preoccupied by his dreams that he had kept his distance from the Onyx. His guilt and shame would not allow him a repeat of the other night’s activities, but his body and, oddly his heart craved it. So much so, that he deliberately put in extra hours at the garage so he would see Shiao less.

“Will you come home, Guy?”

Guy was startled by the question, and found it difficult to answer, so he turned back to work on the engine. "In a while." He expected Shiao to speak again, maybe ask once more if he was okay, but the only sound was that of tools against the engine. One minute turned into two, then three. After five, he wondered if the Onyx had left, but when he turned Shiao was still standing behind him. "What?"

"I'll wait."

Guy blinked in surprise, felt his heart turn over in his chest and his dick harden again. He turned back to the engine. "There's no need. Go home."

"No."

"Fine, wait, but it could be hours before I'm done." Expecting the comment to encourage Shiao to leave, Guy almost sighed when he heard the slight scraping of a chair and when he turned back, Shiao had settled into it and crossed his legs. "This is stupid! Just go home!"

"I don't want to."

"Why?"

"Because you are not there." Shiao folded his gloved hands into his lap. "If you are angry with me, I would prefer you say so. If you are worried that I will accost you again, you need have no fear. I will not do anything without your permission."

Accost him? Is that how Shiao thought of them having sex? He was viewing it as an attack? Guy grabbed a rag and wiped his hands and leaned against the workbench. "Why would you say that?" How could Shiao think such a thing? "What we did was fine, I agreed to it." Hell, technically he instigated it. "I'm *not* upset with you, Shiao."

"You are avoiding me, Guy. I know of no other reason for this new behavior other than our sexual activity."

"I'm busy. I told you that..."

Shiao was out of the chair in an instant and caught Guy by the shoulders. He saw the spark of fear quickly replaced by hostility and gentled his hold. "We agreed never to lie to each other, Guy." Shiao chose his next words carefully, because he had seen that moment of fear. "I would *never* hurt you."

Guy's eyes flashed and then he lowered his gaze. "I don't need you in my head right now," he muttered. "There's too many in there already."

"Who is in your head, Guy?" Shiao cupped the mongrel's face and pulled it up so he could see Guy's eyes. "Riki? Do you somehow feel that you have betrayed him by being with me?"

The fact that Shiao could so easily see what Guy was still struggling to understand alarmed the mongrel. "You don't get it, do you? What I did to him, the way I judged him, it's the same! I'm now doing exactly the same things as what I hated him for!"

Shiao released him suddenly and stepped back. "We have established that you are not a pet, Guy. You are free to decline or accept my requests at will. Riki does not have that option. Riki must do as his Master demands. I am not your Master."

"But it's still the same! You're an Elite and I'm a Mongrel! I despised Riki for letting a Blondie touch him, and when he told me that he loved Iason..." Guy turned away again and curled his hands into fists on the bench. "I thought it was disgusting. A Human and an Android. I judged him, I hurt him because of it and now I'm doing the same thing. I've let an Elite fuck me just like he did and that makes me just as disgusting!"

"There is a simple remedy for your dilemma."

"And what's that?"

"We will never touch each other again."

Guy's chest tightened at the words and he realized how much he didn't want that. The idea of forgoing sex with the Onyx was unpleasant, and he

didn't think it was just because he'd been chaste for so long. This wasn't just his body talking. Still, maybe it would make the dreams stop. Maybe then he wouldn't feel this horrific fear and guilt of Riki... "Shit."

"What is it?" Shiao asked.

"It's not you," Guy assured quietly and turned back. "It really isn't and what we did... I liked that, a lot."

"Then there is another problem?"

"Yeah."

"Would you care to share? I assume it has to do with Riki."

"I'm sorry, Shiao." Guy stalked over to the cooler and retrieved a bottle of beer. He drank half of it down before he turned back. "I know I'm obsessing again, I just can't help it."

"I am aware of your feelings for him, but I am unsure what he has to do with our current activities."

"I think... I think I'm afraid that he'll find out and..." Guy took another swallow of beer. "He'll try to hurt me the way I tried to hurt him."

"You think he will try to assassinate me?"

Guy nodded. "It makes no sense. There's no way he could know and we're not supposed to contact each other, only..."

"The guilt from your past deeds gives you cause to worry."

"It's karma right? I mean I deserve it, don't I? Being all high and mighty with him, telling him how wrong it was to be a pet, to allow an Elite to fuck him, and here I'm doing the same thing."

"The characters involved are similar, but it is not the same. Riki had no choice in becoming a pet, Guy. It is convenient that he grew to care for Iason. That they seemed to have reached a compromise is surprising, and

unheard of in that sort of circumstance, but I believe it only proves how strong and how unique Iason and Riki are.”

“Yeah, I guess, but...”

“You are not Riki and I am not Iason. I care for you, Guy, but I cannot say I love you. I do not know what that means. I would miss you if you were to decide to leave, but I would not attempt to keep you from it or chase after you. It would not change our relationship if you chose not to share my bed. There is a significant difference between what we have done and what they have done. Can you not see it?”

“But I’m still a Mongrel and you’re still an Elite!”

“Yes.” Shiao paused for a moment. “That similarity is what bothers you?”

Guy nodded again, grimly. “I know you’re nothing like Iason, and I’m nothing like Riki, but...I can’t get it out of my head.”

“I understand.” Shiao stepped up and pulled Guy into his arms. “I do understand, Guy. We are friends. We will remain friends and all other things will stop.”

“No!” Guy wrapped his arms around Shiao. “That’s the problem. I don’t want it to stop.” He looked up into Shiao’s emerald eyes. “I don’t want it to ever stop.” He pulled Shiao’s head down and captured the Onyx’s mouth. Shiao returned the kiss until Guy pulled away to breathe.

“What do you want to do, Guy?” Shiao’s voice was quiet, gentle.

“I don’t know.” Guy leaned his head against the Onyx’s chest.

He wanted to be with Shiao, he realized. Mentally, physically, in every way possible and it scared the hell out of him, beyond the guilt of what he did to Riki, he was frightened of what would happen if he let himself fall all the way for the Onyx. The last person he’d done this with, the last person he’d loved was Riki, and that had turned out really, really bad.

“What do you want? Tell me what to do. Tell me what you want me to do.”

“I cannot do that.”

“Why?”

“Then you would be relinquishing your power to me and that is not something you should ever do, to anyone. I am not your Master, Guy.” Shiao felt it was very important that Guy understand the difference between their relationship and the one Iason had with his pet.

Guy groaned, moved around Shiao and dropped down on the chair that Shiao had been in earlier. “Maybe...maybe I should leave. Maybe...I mean, I’m just fucking things up again. I don’t want to do this again. I can’t...”

“Then we will stop.”

Guy suddenly felt like crying and growled in frustration. “I don’t want that! I liked having sex with you, fuck I loved it! It was the best sex I’ve ever had!” Again, he felt a flash of guilt because his statement felt like it was a betrayal of the years he and Riki had together.

Shiao tilted his head. “I also enjoyed it, but we cannot continue if it distresses you, Guy.”

“But...”

Shiao crouched down and caught Guy’s hands. “You are still in love with Riki.”

“No, I’m...” Guy couldn’t get the denial past his lips. He lowered his gaze ashamed. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?” Shiao’s large hand caressed Guy’s hair. “Love between Humans is a special and unique circumstance. You should never be sorry for it.”

“He hates me now. I hurt him and I deserve his hate. I should be able to let him go.”

“What we should do and what we can do is not necessarily the same thing.” Shiao ruffled his hair affectionately. He should have been able to control his emotions, all of the Onyx’s should have, but they could not, and because of that all but him were destroyed. “Physically we seem compatible, and that surprises me somewhat. I am relieved that I could do those things with you without hurting you, but if doing those things with me hurts you because of your feelings for Riki, then we must stop.”

Guy lifted his head and met the Onyx’s gaze. “All I seem to do is hurt people, but I’m not that guy. I’m really not a bad person and...and I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You are not hurting me...”

“Stop lying!” Guy grabbed the lapels of Shiao’s jacket. “I remember what you told me, Shiao! I know how hard doing that, taking that step was for you and how you were after it. Don’t tell me that it doesn’t hurt you if I push you away.”

“All right. I will not deny that I had hoped we could continue our activities, however I understand how you may be conflicted, given your past with Riki and Iason.”

“Do you want me?” Guy asked suddenly.

“Yes.”

“Do you love me?”

Shiao blinked. “I do not have that ability, Guy.”

“Iason does.”

“I am not Iason and I will not lie to you, to keep you with me.”

“You think Iason is lying to Riki? You think he’s been tricking Riki all this time by saying he loves him?”

Shiao could see the spark of hope in Guy's eyes, and was sad for it. Would Guy never truly give up on Riki? He could say that Iason was manipulating Riki, could admit that it was a possibility, but instead, he said. "No. I think Iason truly believes that he loves Riki." He watched the hope die away but felt no remorse, because Guy would only end up hurting himself more if he continued on his destructive path. "I believe they can be happy together and I believe that they are meant to be together."

Guy's stomach curled into knots as each of Shiao's words pierced through his heart, his pride and into his very soul. "Meant to be?" he whispered in disbelief.

"Yes, Guy." Shiao watched the mongrel's internal struggle through the lovely eyes that were set before him. Truly this was a uniquely Human trait, to see such depth of emotion in one's gaze. "You must let Riki go, now. You must free yourself of him completely or you will never be released from this shadow of doom you have made for yourself."

"I love him!"

"Then let him go. Allow him to be free and be happy that he has found love with another, even though it is with Iason Mink."

"How can I? How can I do that?"

"By accepting that Riki loves Iason, that he is happy with him. If you truly loved him, would you not want him to be happy?"

"Yeah. I mean, sure, of course. I only did all that shit because I thought Iason was hurting him."

"We have seen proof that your belief is not the substantiated. They are fine together, let it go."

Guy lowered his head and leaned against Shiao's shoulder. "I really suck at this, don't I?" he muttered. "It's just that Riki was the first friend I ever made in the slums, you know? He saved me from being beaten and raped and then let me stay with him. He looked after me and protected me. The

only reason I had any respect in Ceres was because of Riki. I owe him. I owe him so big and I feel I can't ever pay back that debt."

Shiao again pulled Guy into his embrace. For such a tough looking mongrel, they man had a heart of putty. "The best way to repay him is to let him go and accept the life he has chosen. It is not an ideal life, but he will never go hungry, or be cold. Regardless of what you think of him, Iason will do his best to care for Riki. He is so much better off with Iason than he could ever be in Ceres. Do you at least admit that?"

Guy nodded against Shiao's shoulder.

"Then leave him to it. Riki asked you to forget him and just live your own life. This is a very difficult thing for you to do, and because it is difficult you should consider that doing just that is repayment for such a large debt." He pulled back to gaze into Guy's eyes. "Does that not seem logical to you?"

Guy nodded again. It did seem logical, that the debt he could never repay would be the act of truly and fully letting Riki go and accepting his relationship with Iason. To forget him and live his own life? The idea was unfathomable and so, he supposed, constituted a huge effort or cost on his part. It could be considered payment, if he managed it, against the debt he owed.

"I want to do that," he agreed. "I just don't know how."

"I will help you forget, Guy. I will erase all memory of Riki from your mind and body." Shiao watched Guy tense in a moment of fear and smiled. "No, I will not wipe your mind."

"Yeah. Not," Guy returned relieved. "Been there, done that."

"I will instead, if you permit me to, replace the memory of Riki's touch with my own. I will replace all of your good memories of him, with good memories of me. Would that not aid your recovery and allow you to forget him?"

“I...do you really think you can?”

Shiao rose, pulled Guy with him and then lifted him up onto an empty bench. “All we can do is try,” he said, even as his hand slid under the mongrel’s shirt. “And practice, practice, practice.”

Guy’s eyes closed as his body instantly shivered and responded to Shiao’s touch. “Yeah,” he whispered, even as Shiao’s mouth lowered to his. “Let’s do that.”

Chapter 23

Summary for the Chapter:

Raoul is looking for Katze, and distracts himself with getting his new pet settled in

Notes for the Chapter:

Just a short chapter to let you know I haven't forgotten you. The next one will be longer and I will TRY to get it up by Saturday or Sunday

“What do you mean you don’t know where he is?” Raoul demanded to the face on his terminal.

“Well, Sir, one of his vehicles are at his home address and the other one is parked in the underground at Eos.”

“So, he’s here?”

“We haven’t been able to locate him in Eos, Sir.”

Raoul wondered if Katze had come to meet Iason, but it seemed unlikely. The Black-Market dealer and Iason were very rarely seen together and that, of course, was deliberate. Few knew that Katze actually worked for Iason still.

“When was the last time someone saw him?”

The man on the screen shuffled in discomfort. “We don’t know, Sir. He did arrive very early in the morning, and then others started to arrive and we assumed that he was at work. But then they all left for the day. We made inquiries but no one seemed to have made contact with him.

“They wouldn’t have told you even if they had, idiots!” Raoul drummed his fingers on his desk. “Were any transports requested from that area?”

“None.”

So, Katze had managed to slip away for his vacation, did he? Well, he had promised to give the Human two weeks to get caught up at work and take a break, but he had fully intended to keep tabs on Katze during that time. Katze interested him more and more lately, he found their discussions stimulating and intriguing in a way that nothing else had for quite some time.

“Sir?”

Raoul glanced back at the console. “I will contact you when I need you again.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Raoul ended the call and chuckled. Katze could be in the room next door to him at this very moment, or on a planet no one had ever heard of, and he probably would never know it. Well, that is one of the things that made Katze so unique, and so irresistible. He wet his lips as he thought of all the things he might do to the red-head as punishment for disappearing...

“M...Master Raoul.”

Anjell’s voice was so quiet that if Raoul did not have exceptional hearing he would not have heard it. He turned to see the young, silver-haired pet standing, or rather trembling at the entrance to home office.

“Yes?”

“T...thank you for t...taking me in.”

“Have your injuries healed?” Raoul asked as he patted his lap and the boy tentatively walked forward and settled upon it. When he lifted a hand to the boy’s hair, Anjell flinched. “Not all Master’s hit their pets.” Although he had been quite brutal with Mimea, but there had extenuating circumstances.

“Yes, Master,” Anjell nodded. “I...I know you are a good and...k...kind Master.” Anything would have to be better than the brutality he had endured

at the hands of the Ruby Elite.

“You do, do you?” Raoul smirked and traced a gloved hand across the boy’s cheek, then curled it under the small half shirt to lift it up. There was still some evident bruising across Anjell’s torso, but it was fading thanks to the healing wand that the medics had used when they had taken the boy from Rodin. “I’ve placed you with my other pet, she will take care of you and you can trust her to show you how I like things to be.”

“Thank you, Master.”

“You are a very grateful pet, aren’t you?” Raoul mused, aloud as Peter entered the room.

“Your car is ready, Sir.”

Raoul nodded, he had a date with clients this evening to arrange some off-planet pet merchandise. “Have you eaten, pet?”

“No, Master.”

“You need not call me master after every word.” Raoul caught the Unicyn’s chin and lifted the boy’s gaze so he could get a look at those incredible violet eyes. “And look at me when I speak to you.”

“M...Master Rodin said I should never look an Elite in the eye.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

“Because he said I am a bug, Ma...Sir, and bugs shouldn’t look Gods in the eye.”

“Rodin is as far from a God, as am I.” Raoul lightly kissed the boy’s lips. “I want to see those pretty eyes of yours as often as possible. I want to watch how they change when you are aroused and how they are when you are sated and happy. Understand?”

Anjell nodded.

“Good.” Raoul slid him off his lap and patted his ass. “Go and have Peter fix you something to eat. Just tell him what you want and he’ll make it for you.”

“I just made vegetable pasta dish,” Peter offered kindly. “And I can add salad with it if you like?”

Anjell’s eyes widened. “Salad?” he glanced back at Raoul, looking frightened and confused. “I...I may have salad?”

“Of course, from what I understand your kind are vegetarians?” Raoul asked, curious. They didn’t know much about the Unicyn species but he did know that much at least.

“Y...yes.” Anjell’s eyes flickered from Raoul to Peter and it looked like he might cry. “I...I like salads very...very much.”

Raoul was suspicious of the boy’s reaction. “What did your former Master feed you?”

“R...raw meat.”

“Raw?” Peter gasped. “Not even cooked?”

“He...he said an animal should...eat like one.”

“And what exactly was this, raw meat?”

“I...I do not know. It was gray, sometimes black. It had a long tail on it, but I only got one when...when I particularly pleased Master Rodin.”

Rats? The Ruby fed a Unicyn boy dead rats? There were no rats in Eos, and if there were any in Tangura they were quickly and discretely disposed of, which meant that Rodin had gone out of his way to bring the foul creatures in just to torture his pet.

Raoul was incensed and decided that he would have to speak with Jupiter regarding Rodin’s behavior. The Elite had a God Complex, there was no doubt, and was ridiculously prejudiced against other species, but being so it

was reasonable that the Ruby would have refused a Unicyn pet from the start, rather than accept it and torture it.

“And when you didn’t please him?” he asked Anjell, very quietly.

“I was punished and not given any, but I...I didn’t mind because the meat usually made my stomach hurt very badly.”

Raoul was astonished that any Elite could behave in such a barbaric manner. Yes, he would definitely have a word with Jupiter, and perhaps teach Rodin a lesson or two himself. He was, after all, both a chemist and an engineer and the Golden Rule was only that you could not *kill* another Elite. There was nothing regarding making one severely and painfully ill. He would of course, keep that idea to himself and not advise Jupiter of the new campaign.

“Well, here you may eat as much as you like,” he said to Anjell. “And as often as you like with all the vegetables you like. Off you go then and eat your fill.” When the boy remained standing halfway between the Blondie and his Furniture, Raoul said. “Did you want something else?”

“No,” Anjell replied quietly. He could not say how he just wanted to go home, how this place was horrific and scary and frightened him beyond reason. He knew he would not be freed, but perhaps his new Master would be easier to adjust too. “May...May I ask? How...How is Riki?”

“Ah, that’s right,” Raoul nodded. “You and he are friends, aren’t you?”

“No. He said we cannot be friends. I...I only hope he is well.”

“He is a hard one to get close to.” Raoul would ask Iason about arranging a play date for their pets. Oh, that’s right, Riki was no longer considered a pet. Well, perhaps he would just ask them both to dinner so that Anjell could catch up with the mongrel. He’d developed a soft spot for the young alien boy, though where that had come from he simply couldn’t say. Perhaps he needed an upgrade. “Run along and have your meal.”

“Yes, Master.” Anjell followed Peter out and Raoul was alone again. “Have you heard from Cal?”

“No, Sir,” Peter admitted. “Nor was I expecting to.”

“Hmmm.” Raoul rose as Peter stepped forward to help him on with his cloak. “Bring Iason a bottle of my Breen wine, make sure you have a moment or two to speak to Cal.”

“Are you worried about him, Sir, because of what happened?”

“Merely curiosity.”

Peter refrained from making an additional comment, knowing his Master well enough to understand that Raoul would neatly avoid any inference that he had feelings for any Human, outside of a strictly scientific reason. Raoul may frighten others, with his covert experiments and willingness to test a subject’s limits, but Peter simply adored him. His Master could be hard and often cold, but he was always fair and he always rewarded his Furniture and pets at the most unexpected times.

“Have a good evening, Sir,” he said as he followed Raoul to the exit portal. “I hope the transaction goes well.”

“Thank you, Peter. Once you’ve fed and bathed the pets you may retire, I will not be back until late.”

“Very good, Sir.” Peter watched his master disappear through the portal, then turned back as Raoul’s female pet appeared. “Did you need something?”

“Is he gone?” she pouted. “I wanted to ask him if I could go shopping tomorrow.”

“You can ask him in the morning.” Peter started towards the kitchen, where he had already set the pet-table. “Come and eat your dinner.”

“I’m not hungry! I wanted to talk to Raoul!”

“Come to the table, Shira, or you will get no credit this week to buy anything.”

“You’re so mean!”

“I am Furniture and you are my charge, now move before I get the wand.”

Shira hustled her barely clad booty into the kitchen, fully aware that Peter would carry out his threat.

Notes for the Chapter:

I don't know why I'm picking on Rodin, I just need someone to pick on :-)

Chapter 24

Summary for the Chapter:

Iason has been working hard and wants a special treat from Riki

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for the delay everyone, hope you enjoy this much longer chapter. The opening part of the story is as per a request from Megha Shakya :-) If you like it, please comment and review, if you don't- I shall be so sad :-(

“Iason!”

Iason turned and saw Issac walking towards him, looking smug and waving a data disk. “What do you need, Issac?”

“I found the book you were looking for!” the other Blondie advised, his voice heightened in excitement. Issac was easily the least reserved of all of the Elites and carried his emotions very close to the service. “A Tale of Two Cities, that was the title, wasn’t it? I don’t know why you would want to read Terran literature, but you wanted it so I found it. May I read it when you’re done?”

Iason smiled and accepted the disc. “If you do not understand my interest in it, why would you chose to also read it?”

“To see why you are interested, of course,” Issac returned as if the idea was completely logical to him.

“It is a story of revolution, Issac.”

“There are no revolutions here, you and Jupiter have fixed the Mongrels to ensure that, and no one would challenge Jupiter, so why read it?”

“Our solution works for now, but what is there to say for the future? We must be sure that there remain no insurgencies. Understanding the complexities of Human thought and needs is paramount to our own evolution. In reading about them, I can better understand the triggers that might cause a rebellion. By understanding these traits, I can remove them from the equation so that they will never feel the need to rise up against us.”

Issac grinned. “You are so wise, Iason. I wish I had your inner workings. You see and know everything!”

“Not yet, sweet Issac, but soon. You too can expand your knowledge, there are many ways to do so, if you wish to learn more about Humans.”

“I know enough about them now, they are of little interest to me, as they shall never be a threat to us. We are Blondies, after all. Are you going to Orphe’s pet party? I have a new pet, a girl, she is very responsive and I am eager to see how she performs with the others.”

“I will attend and will look forward to seeing your new pet on display.”

Issac’s smile widened. “I believe my girl will enjoy your pet. What was his name? Stans?”

“I no longer have him.”

Issac frowned, then chuckled. “Really, Iason. You go through pets like the rest of us go through wine. What was wrong with this one?”

“He bored me.”

“They all seem to bore you after a few weeks or so. Why do you not try one of Raoul’s new creations? He says they are genetically enhanced to respond better and last longer.”

“That is not the issue,” Iason confessed.

“Then what is the issue? Are they not pretty enough?”

“No, they are all pretty and accommodating and sexually enticing.”

“Then I do not understand why you cannot be satisfied with one..”

“Nor do I. It is not something I can pinpoint. I can only tell you that my next pet must be extraordinary, on many levels, or I shall remain petless.”

Issac scowled. “How un-Blondie of you.” Then he smiled and threw an arm around Iason’s shoulders. “I do not care if you are petless, you are my favorite brother and shall remain so, no matter how foolishly you behave.”

“You have the gall to call me foolish?” Iason asked, lifted an eyebrow in amusement. “Was it not you who mixed that elixir and poured it into Gideon’s drink a fortnight ago that turned his hair brown?”

Issac’s eyes twinkled merrily. “I thought he could use some color, and I did not wish to offend him by giving him the color of a lower Elite.”

“I am not sure he appreciated your thoughtfulness.”

“I thought it looked rather good on him.” Gideon giggled gloriously, he was the only Blondie that had managed the very Human sounding laugh. “He was incredibly horrified, wasn’t he?”

“I think it is a good thing myself and Raoul were there to keep him from ripping you apart.”

“Gideon can rarely accept the consequences of a jest that is played upon him, yet he takes part in those that affect others consistently. He needs to rethink his humor.”

“Perhaps you should rethink your status? If you continue to annoy the others they may ask Jupiter to shut you down.”

Issac deliberately turned his mouth down and widened his eyes, it was the closest he could manage as a Blondie to a Human pout. “You would not allow that, would you? Am I not your favorite brother? Who would you play Tamarak with if I were terminated? Who would find your rare books for

you? Who would you watch those strange films of yours with you, if not me?"

"Well," Iason began, forcing himself not to smile. "As you are of such vital importance I suppose I will have to protect you from them, but please, do not affect anyone else's hair! A Blondie's hair is his crowning glory, and to disturb it in such a manner is dishonorable." Iason reached across and grabbed a handful of Issac's beautiful golden locks. "If you do repeat the offense I shall shave you bald-headed."

Issac giggled again. "A bald Blondie, what an intriguing concept."

"Issac," Iason warned, despite the hilarity at the idea.

"Oh very well, I shall behave, as long as you promise to always have time to visit with me. You know I could not bear this place without our chats, Iason."

"Of course," Iason returned, as his fist turned into a caress to smooth the hair he had tangled. "You are my dearest brother."

"Always, Iason. I shall always be here for you."

Iason switched off his screen and Issac's room disappeared. They had been very close once, very close, and there was a spark of truth to the fact that Iason became obsessed over Riki and started spending less time with all of his brothers, not just Issac. He could not comprehend why Issac would have gone to such extreme methods just to garner his attention again.

Issac's personality was neither vengeful or one of hate, yet both emotions seemed evident when they spoke in Jupiter's meeting. They had all dismissed Issac's behavior in the past because everyone was very fond of him, despite his sometimes annoying or unreasonable actions. He could not have dismissed the actions that Issac took against Riki, or the serious breach it allowed in their security.

He stood by his decision, but that didn't mean he did not experience regret. Issac would no longer remember their shared experiences together, but

Iason believed that would be for the best. It would be easier for Issac to move on if he did not recall those memories.

Shaking his head for allowing himself to be pulled into the past, he rose and slipped on his cloak. He needed to go home. He wanted to see Riki and forget about all of this for a while.

Closing and securing his office door, he stepped out of his office and took the stairs down to the lower floors, then entered a portal that took him to the lot outside his building. The condo was quiet a mixture of relief and excitement at seeing both Riki and Cal in the living room.

“Good, you are both here.”

“Where else would we be?” Riki retorted as he stepped in from the balcony where he had been smoking one of his regular cigarettes. He was looking forward to the delivery from Katze of his new ones.

Cal moved to take Iason’s cloak and hang it up as the Blondie stalked towards Riki and yanked the mongrel against him for a mind-blowing kiss, despite the mongrel’s half-hearted attempt at protest.

“I have worked very, very hard this week, and you are going to give me a special reward for my efforts.”

“Says who?”

“Your master.” Iason captured Riki’s lips again.

Riki pushed back against Iason in anger for a brief moment, before his body inevitably softened against the onslaught, or at least *most* of him softened. A kiss from Iason was all it took for Riki to become aroused, regardless of what state his emotions were in.

Iason released Riki just in time to avoid the bite Riki aimed for his lower lip. “Careful, *consort*, or I will have to punish you.”

“You keep talking like that and you can go fuck the broom cupboard, you bastard!” Riki hissed but there was a playfulness in Iason’s gaze that he had

never seen before. Was the Blondie just messing with him?

Iason smiled and wrapped his arms around Riki, then just as quickly let him go. He turned back to Cal, as the young boy reappeared. "It seems we are in need of Furniture yet again," he said as he put some distance between him and Riki and moved towards one of the twin sofas.

"Apologies, sir." Cal again bowed slightly. "Shall I arrange for another?"

"No." Iason settled down, crossed one long leg over the other and then beckoned with his hand. "Come here."

Riki scowled but moved to the sofa.

Iason smiled, caught Riki's hand, kissed it and then pulled the mongrel down beside him. "Lovely, but I meant Cal."

Iason *was* teasing him! Riki elbowed him, still pretending to be mad, as Cal stepped closer. "You see the shit I have to put up with when you're not here?" he said, hoping to win at least a glimmer of amusement from Cal, but the boy had lost all of his earlier easiness and now his expression remained disturbingly blank.

"What is it you wish me to do, Sir?"

"I would like you to resume your duties as my Furniture, as well as continue to be Riki's tutor. Do you think you can manage it?"

"Wait," Riki began, "I thought you said he couldn't be Furniture because of the age law? Will they come after him if you do this?"

"No, and that's why you owe me a reward."

Riki stared at Iason for a long moment and then realized what the Blondie meant. "You overturned it?" For the first time in years Riki felt excitement. He hopped up on his knees and slapped his hands on Iason's chest. "You fucking over-turned it? For real?"

"For real."

Iason was thrilled by Riki's reaction and didn't bother to mention all the back-room deals he'd had to cut, but now the age law for Furniture was no more. A boy could remain with a household for as long as his master desired it, with no pressure to leave or be redistributed. He felt it was better to do away with the law all together, than to risk someone else trying to get it reinstated and after several arguments and concessions, the other Blondies finally agreed. Gideon had been the last cog in a very large wheel.

"That's great!" Riki exclaimed. "Cal, isn't that great? Now you don't have to worry anymore."

"Cal." Iason's voice was quiet as the boy focused on the Blondie again.

"Yes, Sir?"

Iason could not see even a hint of emotion in Cal's face, and that concerned him. Cal had never been overly demonstrative, few Furniture were after training, but Cal had always allowed a small flicker of the child inside to show on occasion, especially after being exposed to Riki. Now, not even that remained. "If you require more time..."

"My requirements are only to serve you, Sir."

"Cal, you don't have to be so formal," Riki said and started to rise, but felt Iason's hand in his tighten in warning.

"As you like. You may have your old room behind the kitchen." Iason had noticed that Cal and Yielia had switched rooms while Riki was ill and he did demand an explanation, but now he wanted to put Cal fully at ease. "We can have it redone, or you can remain on the second floor, which do you prefer?"

"The kitchen room will be acceptable, Sir. I do not require a change, but thank you for your consideration."

"It's settled then." Iason would refurbish the room regardless and, he suddenly decided, it was time for a new kitchen as well. That would give Cal something to focus on and hopefully erase every trace of Bean, while

allowing Cal to create a safe and secure environment for himself. “However, if you find that your duties are too much with both assignments, let me know and I shall hire you a part time assistant.”

“That will not be necessary.”

Cal was barely holding himself together. He was both disappointed and relieved that he would be the Furniture again, but he could not show either of these emotions. It was taking everything he had just to maintain a calm façade in the face of his shame as he stood before the two people he cared most for.

Riki had admitted that Iason already knew of what had happened to him, and that alone reason enough not to show even an ounce of emotion or weakness. He could not allow proof that he was damaged and no longer worthy, because he had nowhere else to go. And, if he was honest with himself, being with Iason and Riki was the only place he wanted to be.

He should inquire after Bean, he felt that if he did not it would add to his own guilt, and yet he could not make himself do so. He didn’t care where the other Furniture was or why he had been dismissed. He hoped he never saw Bean again, and that was a terrible thing to acknowledge.

“I feel I must be clear on this,” Iason continued, watching Cal closely. “While I have repealed the law for other Furniture, that is no longer your designation. You are still my ward and Riki’s tutor, however he feels you are also capable of running the house, and that is why I’ve given you this opportunity. We will try it for a while and see how it goes, but if it is too much I will have to hire someone else.”

“I understand,” Cal returned quietly.

“Good.” Iason glanced at his watch. “How much time before dinner?”

“Master Riki has invited a guest to arrive at six and I shall serve the meal once she is here.”

Iason glanced at Riki. “You talked to Carrie?”

“Yeah,” Riki returned and felt his lips twitch.

When he told Carrie about his change of status he had expected some sort of reaction, but nothing had prepared him for how truly excited she had become. She squealed and grabbed him, then released him then jumped up and down and grabbed him again. She hugged him, and kissed both his cheeks and then his mouth, then she squealed again and pumped the air with her fist. The third time he found himself in her embrace she actually lifted him off his feet and spun him around, which embarrassed the hell out of him.

Everyone had stopped to stare at them, some laughed though most simply looked appalled and Riki finally had to pry himself away from her. He pretended to be offended and upset but in all honesty, he'd been secretly delighted by Carrie's behavior. She was the only person who gave a real and physical reaction to the news, the only one who showed the kind of elation that Riki wished he could feel for himself. But he wasn't wired that way. No longer being a pet was pretty damn amazing, but he couldn't jump up and down and laugh as Carrie had. Maybe that was why he was still struggling with how he felt about it.

“Riki?”

Riki glanced at Iason and realized he'd let himself get lost in his own thoughts. “She's curious why you invited her, and so am I. Why did you?”

“To discuss something with her, and to show our gratitude for her assistance on Avalon.”

“Huh.”

“But for now...” Iason rose, grabbed Riki and threw him over his shoulder. “We have almost two hours to play.”

“Put me down!” Riki demanded slapping Iason's back and wincing when he hurt his hand. “Motherfucker! I'm not in the mood! Let me go!”

Yiela, who had been coming down the stairs as they were coming up, scowled. “What are you doing?”

“It is not your concern,” Iason stated. “Move aside.”

“Riki has demanded you release him and you will comply!”

Iason’s hand shot out to grab her by the throat, but she neatly avoided it and caught his wrist in her hand instead. “You overstep your boundaries, woman,” he warned, menacingly as his other hand, faster than the first, caught the one gripping him and swiftly twisted it back, breaking her hold. “I will not tell you again.”

“I will not allow you to hurt, Maku!” Yiela’s free hand flashed green, and Riki squirmed down off of Iason’s shoulder while the two were occupied.

“Stop!” He put both hands between them. “What are you doing?”

“You instructed him to release you and he refused,” Yiela stated angrily. “What else can I do but destroy him?”

“Destroy?” Iason lifted an amused eyebrow even though his eyes flashed red at her impudence.

“I’m fine!” Riki insisted, mortified that he had to go back on his protests, in front of both of them. “It’s just the way he is. Don’t pay any attention to it.”

“How can I not when I know he is hurting you? Riki. I have tried very hard to understand the relationship you have with this creature. You claim it is consensual, yet he often ignores your wishes, and the way he makes you...” She felt her cheeks flood with heat for probably the first time ever as she remembered the screams and sounds she sometimes heard coming from their room. “He seems to be torturing you.”

It was Riki’s turn to be embarrassed, but he wasn’t about to stand here and discuss his relationship with this woman, or how the sounds he made during sex were not from pain. “Look, what we do or how we do it is none of your business. You’re here by Iason’s permission, not mine.”

“I understand, yet you...”

“You can’t interfere!” He suddenly realized that he did want her to stay, although he wasn’t exactly sure why. “Iason isn’t hurting me, okay? Whatever we do is consensual.”

“Even when he is carrying you against your wishes?”

Oh God, Riki moaned inwardly. Why were they even having this conversation? How did he explain, without making himself look like an absolute idiot, that it was his habit to say no and kick up a fuss? It didn’t mean he was really saying no and Iason wouldn’t care if it did; Riki mostly counted on that.

“If I may?”

All three turned to find Cal standing on the stairs behind them.

“It is very dangerous to gather this way. Miss Yielā, if you would please join me downstairs and allow Master Iason and Riki to pass? I will attempt to explain the dynamic of relationships here, so you may better understand them and be relieved of concern,” He extended his hand to the woman.

Yielā’s angry gaze remained on Iason, who still viciously gripped her wrist, until Riki touched the Blondie’s arm. Her hand released, she reached past him to Cal’s. “Please do.” As she started past, Iason gripped her arm.

“If you ever interfere us again I will have you shipped back to Avalon, in *pieces*.”

Yielā met Iason’s icy gaze full on. “I will protect, Maku, and not even you will stop me.”

“Enough!” Riki said, pulling Iason up the stairs. “Just let it go, already.”

Iason waited until Cal had led Yielā down the stairs and out of site before turning back to Riki. “Why did you stop me?”

“Because I don’t want you to kill her.”

“Then she should stay out of my way.”

Riki sighed and rubbed at the beginnings of a headache between his eyes. “Fine, fuck it. Go kill her, then you can take me back to Avalon.”

“Why would I do that?”

“So I can offer myself to the fucking Queen after you made me break our deal to her to keep Yielā safe, because that’s what I’ll have to do!”

“Riki...” Iason began but the mongrel had turned and stormed up the stairs. He quickly followed and managed to stop Riki from slamming the bedroom door in his face. “She has been nothing but trouble, Riki. We should just send her back!”

“Do what you want. I’m taking a shower.”

Iason scowled as Riki disappeared inside the bathroom and closed the door. He pulled off his tunic and tossed it across the room, angrily. This day was not going as he had hoped and it was all that woman’s fault. He reached for his wrist communicator, wrenched it off and dropped it on one of the staggered wall shelves that bordered either side of the bed.

He should have had one of the men shove her out of an airlock on the way back to Amoī and claim it as an acid...His fingers hovered over the bracelet that he had started to remove, the one Riki had given him.

“Riki?” he said very quietly as he stared at the bracelet and ran his fingers over it. “Riki!” He burst into the bathroom just as Riki was about to remove his trousers and step into the shower.

“I’m not talking...” Riki snarled, even as Iason pushed forward and shoved his wrist almost under the mongrel’s nose.

“Look! Riki, look!”

Riki glanced down and gaped at the small, almost imperceptibly thin strip of orange that dotted the bracelet. He grabbed Iason’s wrist and pulled up his own, which wore the matching bracelet. His was a light shade of near

olive green, only it filled the entire piece. “What...What is this?” he asked, amazed and slowly settled down on the small bench seat behind him.

“It’s color!” Iason crouched down so they were evenly matched. “It changed color!”

“But...I thought it couldn’t? I thought...”

“It shouldn’t be able to but it has.” Iason caught Riki’s bare shoulders. “Riki! I am irritated, confused and indignant! Isn’t that wonderful!”

Riki stared at him, still not quite understanding what Iason was so excited about, until he caught Riki’s wrist and kissed the bracelet around it.

“You are stressed and worried. Oh, Riki, I am so happy that I can see your feelings and you can see mine! Look! Yours is changing, now it’s turning red, no violet!” Iason was like a child with a new toy, he kept comparing their bracelets, and then he started frowning. “Why isn’t mine changing color? It should reflect my new emotion, shouldn’t it? I don’t feel those things anymore, why isn’t it changing?” He flicked at the bracelet and shook his wrist. “Change color!”

Riki couldn’t take it anymore, he caught Iason’s face between his hands, pulled him forward and kissed him.

“What was that for?” Iason asked when they finally broke apart. It was rare that Riki initiated a kiss.

Riki couldn’t explain why he had done it, couldn’t admit that Iason had been so desirable in those few moments, so charming and unforgivably adorable that he’d been unable to stop himself from kissing the Blondie. “Congratulations,” he offered instead. “But how is it even working? You don’t have any body chemistry.”

“I’m not sure. I’ll ask Raoul to look at it.” Iason cupped Riki’s face this time. “Are we still arguing?”

Why couldn't he stay mad at Iason anymore? He never used to have that problem. "I guess not," Riki sighed.

"Then can we continue this in the bedroom? We'll have even less time now before our guest arrives."

"We still have time for a quick fuck, why the rush?"

Iason rose and pulled Riki with him. "I don't want a quick fuck, I want you to show me what it means to top."

Riki dropped back on the seat with a resounding thud. "You...what?"

"I was given to believe this is something you did with Guy?"

"Well...yeah, but..."

"Then it is something I wish to experience with you as well." He had been unsuccessful in completely erasing Guy from Riki's memory and desire, therefore he decided to reinvent all the things they had done together and replace those old memories.

"Do you know what it means? I mean...to top?"

"I do not, but I am sure you can tell me so we may attempt it."

"It means I get to do you, Iason."

Iason stared at him. "Do me?" That was the term Riki often used when referring to them having sexual intercourse. "Do *me*?"

"Yeah!" Riki didn't even what to think about where Iason got the idea of him topping, he just wanted to stop talking about it altogether. "It means what you normally do to me I would do to you!"

Iason's eyes suddenly narrowed to slits. "And you did this with that mongrel?"

“If you mean, Guy, yes. Of course I did!”

“Why?”

“What do you mean why? Because we were friends and pairing partners.”

“Explain.”

Riki took a deep, frustrated breath. “Figure it out yourself, for fuck sake!” He rose and started to storm off towards the bedroom but Iason caught his arm.

“Explain why being pairing partners and friends necessitates role reversal.”

Riki shook off Iason’s arm, angrily. “That’s how it is! That’s what’s fair between two partners, is to take turns and to make things equal and because...”

“Continue,” Iason warned, darkly.

“Because it feels really good to screw someone!”

“Do I not deliver enough pleasure for you?”

“Yeah, I mean, mostly.” Riki got more pleasure with Iason than he ever had with all the men he’d slept with combined.

“Mostly?” Iason caught his arms and stared hard into Riki’s dark eyes. “What can he make you feel that I cannot?”

“In control!” Riki barked in a fit of temper, and while part of him warned him to take it back, to apologize, or even just walk away, he was already furious from Iason’s earlier harassment. “Screwing Guy made me feel in control and powerful and proud and I don’t ever get to feel that way with you because you’re always the one in control!”

Iason’s gaze suddenly softened. “Is that something you still require? Do you still not feel comfortable here, Riki?”

“It’s not about that!” Iason didn’t get it. Riki was still scrutinized everywhere he went, was still looked upon as a mongrel and a pet. He still couldn’t go where he wanted when he wanted and be with who he wanted without clearing it with Iason.

“You would prefer to be with him, still?” Iason demanded.

“No! You’re not understanding!”

“Then explain it to me! I believed we were doing well and that you had accepted being here with me and yet you are still thinking about that bastard mongrel!”

“I wasn’t thinking about him at all until you brought him up you fucking moron!”

Riki’s startling insult caused Iason to reanalyze their previous conversation. True, he had been the one to bring up Guy, but only in the context of what the mongrel had mentioned to him about topping. He had hoped to surprise Riki with his inquiry, as Guy had made the endeavor seem something his beloved would welcome, but instead Riki was shocked and angered by it.

Perhaps that had been Guy’s intent all along, to challenge Iason to mention this thing to Riki, proving that Riki and Guy did things together that they could not. Perhaps this was all a way to cause conflict between them? If this was so, he needed to repair the damage immediately. He would not allow Guy to interfere in their relationship ever again.

Riki spoke of pleasure and fairness in his relationship with Guy, of a kind of equality. Iason was an Elite, even with the change in Riki’s status they could never be equals, because Riki was Human. He may be a prince on Avalon but they were not on Avalon and on Amoï a Human was simply the lowest class of being. What could he do to allow Riki a semblance of that balance that he had shared with Guy? How could he allow Riki to feel about him as he had felt about damned mongrel?

“Very well.” Iason started to undress. “Shall we begin?”

Riki stared up at him. “Begin what?”

“The topping, of course.”

“You...what? Do you still not understand what I said?”

“I do. To use your crude vernacular you wish to be the one to fuck me, as I have been fucking you. Is that not correct?”

“I...that’s what it means, yeah.”

“Then I have no issue with it.” For this one time, Iason decided silently.

“You really want me to do you?”

Iason nodded, stepped around Riki and turned off the water for the shower which had been running all this time. He turned quickly, so fast that Riki didn’t have time to react before his lips were captured and his body put in a full state of arousal by Iason’s hands.

“W...wait,” Riki gasped, even as Iason picked him up with one arm and walked with him back into the bedroom. “Iason, wait...”

Iason dumped Riki on the bed and placed one knee between the mongrel’s legs. “You will need to be properly stimulated in order to proceed with the topping will you not?”

Riki started to answer but Iason’s gloved fingers started rubbing his nipples, one of his ‘good spots’ as he once confessed to Guy, and he arched upwards in pleasure. Did Iason really expect him to do this or was the Blondie just getting him worked up to prove how foolish the idea was? Would Iason even enjoy being screwed? He didn’t see how, or why it...

“Huuuhhh!” Riki’s fingers dove into Iason’s hair his cock disappeared into the Blondie’s mouth. Good! So fucking good! He fully expected Iason to bring him to the brink, as he always did and then give him permission to fall over it, so he was shocked and dismayed when the suction abruptly stopped after only a few minutes.

“I believe that will be sufficient, will it not?” Iason purred into Riki’s ear, enjoying the sweet dilation of Riki’s pupils as the mongrel’s arousal threatened to overtake him.

“W...what?” Why did he stop? What was happening? “Iason,” Riki reached his arms to wrap around Iason’s shoulders. “More.”

“If I go further you will be unable to top me, *pet*.”

The hated word brought Riki back to his senses in an instant. He tried to push Iason off and roll away but Iason was on him in an instant and trapped Riki against the mattress. “Where are you going?”

“Stop...stop teasing me,” Riki muttered struggling, even though he knew it was useless. “Let me go.”

Iason captured Riki’s lips and pinned them over his head so he could properly stare down at the mongrel. “Why do you think I am teasing you?”

Riki turned his head to the side, away from Iason’s probing gaze. “You... you know I can’t do that.” Shame filled him because while he fought to have more control over his life, Iason had trained him too well. The idea of screwing Iason was far too intimidating for a slum mongrel, even for a very proud one like him.

Iason’s hold softened and he adjusted their positions so that he lay beside Riki and held him in his arms, pleased when Riki curled into his chest. “Why?”

“How can you ask me that?”

“I have no other way to ascertain the answer otherwise.”

“You’ve spent years breaking me down and forcing me to do your will. Do you really think it had no affect? That it still isn’t affecting me?”

“You fight against me all the time.”

“It’s not the same.”

Iason played with Riki's hair. "Help me to understand why. I have given my permission, and I am willing to try it so we may experience it together."

"Because I did it with Guy? That's not a reason to do it, Iason."

"I will not deny that is part of the reason, I wish to erase all your experiences with him and replace them with our own, but I am also curious." He caught Riki's chin and gently forced the mongrel to look at him. "I wish to see the pleasure it brings you, Riki. I wish to have all your pleasure and this is one that has been missing."

Riki stared up into those intense blue eyes and felt his heart flip over in his chest as a flutter of excitement sparked his softening organ to slowly rise again. "You might not like it." What if Iason didn't like it? What if Riki was not adept enough at ringing pleasure from the Blondie the way Iason managed to coax it from him.

"I may not, but we shall not know until we try."

Riki stared at Iason's bare chest as his fingers instinctively reached for the strands of blond hair that fell over his lover's shoulder. Iason had talked about a special reward but Riki wasn't sure he was up to the task.

"Can we...can we do it another time?" he whispered, ashamed that he had to forgo the chance, but he really needed to work up to something like that.

"If you wish, my love." Iason rolled Riki onto his back and kissed him gently. "We shall save it for later then."

Riki, trying to salvage at least some of his pride, suddenly pushed against Iason and the Blondie allowed it so that he was laying on his back as Riki climbed atop him. "I can still give you a reward," he decided as he slid down Iason's long body and freed him as Iason had done to him moments earlier.

Iason smiled and watched as Riki's mouth engulfed him in a hot, moist heat. "We will be late for dinner," he decided, his gaze never leaving Riki's

for a single moment.

Chapter 25

Summary for the Chapter:

Carrie is invited to dinner and shares her story about how she came to Amoi

Notes for the Chapter:

I am SO SO SO very sorry everyone for the delay. This new job and shift is killing me, all I am doing is working and sleeping, even on my days off. I have not written a single word in over a week, so I frantically tried to get as much done today (while I was still conscious) so I could get it posted. The problem is that once I started to write I couldn't stop, so I hope it doesn't come out as just babbling. It's a bit of a detour from the regular story but I know several of you wanted to know more about Carrie and I really wanted to tell it. It's a long one, but I hope you enjoy it and I will do my best to post again within the week.

Carrie stepped through the transport portal, after receiving clearance from Eos security, and stared at the darkened privacy field that rose before her as high as she could see. There was a door just a few feet away, and what looked like an elevator opposite it. She wished she had known about the elevator because she really disliked traveling by portal, but she had gone where she had been directed to go upon approaching the high-end condo.

She smoothed down the lines of her pale green skirt and adjusted the collar of her light pink blouse. Riki's invitation for dinner had been a surprise and a delight, but for some reason, now that she was here, she felt nervous. Despite what they had been through together, Iason Mink was still the top Blondie of Tanagura, and some would say Amoi, and she couldn't imagine what purpose he had for asking her to come here.

During their time on Avalon, Carrie had revealed far more about herself to Iason than she had ever intended, and it wasn't until after she had been back behind her stall that she realized how devastatingly wrong her actions had been. Iason and Riki were part of her Pride, she meant that with all of her heart, but she had been betrayed so many times already that it was difficult for her to believe that this invitation was only a matter of courtesy.

No, Iason wanted something from her, she could feel it in her bones that she had been called here under the guise of a social dinner for some greater purpose. She liked Iason, truly she did, but now he knew who she was, what she was, and it would probably be inadvisable to refuse whatever request he might make of her. She could no longer trust that he would not use her secret against her, as others had.

The familiar sting of panic began prick at her chest and then dropped, uncomfortably into her stomach and her feet involuntarily stepped backwards towards the portal. All manner of excuses started to fill her head of why she had to decline the dinner, she was too busy, she was ill or it wasn't a good time. Then she remembered that security would have already contacted Iason and advised she had arrived.

Motherfuckingshitmongeringsonofawhore! She blinked in shock, wondering where such thoughts had come from, then recalled she had once heard Riki say something similar and had been amused by it. Great, the little shit was rubbing off on her.

Her hand clenched against her stomach as she willed her feet to go forward but no amount of will power would allow it. Defeated, she started to turn back just as she spotted Riki, leaning against the doorway of the entrance beyond the darkened privacy field.

"How much longer are you going to stand there?" he demanded quietly.

Carrie stared at him and felt heat sting her cheeks. Here she was having a panic attack and fretting over Iason Mink's motives, and Riki had been waiting for her to come for dinner. She could see the confusion in his eyes, and the disappointment that she was still outside of the apartment.

She held out both her hands to him, and was relieved when Riki pushed off the doorway without hesitation and walked towards her, his disappointment turned to concern.

“Are you not feeling well?” he asked and took her hands. “You’re like ice. What’s wrong?”

She couldn’t tell him that she was afraid of walking through that door, afraid that her life here would be over and that once again she would have to flee to save herself. The idea of leaving Riki and never seeing him again. No. She’d finally found someone she could be close to again, someone who could be part of her Pride. No way was she losing that.

“I’m just really, really hungry.” She watched the tension in his shoulders immediately relax and was relieved when he smirked.

“Cal’s made lots, so we can take care of that.” He kept hold of one of her hands and started towards the door, but she tugged him back.

“Riki, no matter what happens tonight, promise me that it won’t change how we are with each other. That we’ll still be friends?”

Riki frowned. “What are you talking about?” He let go of her hand, suspiciously. “What do you think is gonna happen and why would anything change?”

“It’s nothing.” He couldn’t possibly understand and she felt he had enough to worry about without her burdening him with the hell that had been her life. She reached for his hand again, squeezed then released. “It’s nothing. Let’s go eat.”

Riki held her gaze a moment longer, then shoved his hands into his pants pockets. “Come on then.”

They stepped through the door and Carrie was almost blinded by a room of incredibly brilliant white. White furniture, white flooring, white walls, well, not actually walls more like a silvery-white energy field around the room than a solid, actual surface. She could see a set of glass doors to the right

that probably led to a balcony and a set of spiraling stairs, set back from the living area, that rose to adjoining platforms that were also surrounded by the same silver-white fields. She didn't think Elites used stairs as they had the portals to get them about.

Iason rose from a white sofa that was identical to the one across from it, and appeared to be the only touch of colour in his emerald green cloak jacket, white and green tunic and matching slacks. "Riki was afraid you'd gotten lost," he said as they stepped down to the living area.

"No, I just..." Carrie clenched her stomach again. "Traveling by portal always upsets my stomach a little."

"Cal, bring her an elixir, would you?"

"Yes, Sir."

Carrie jumped a little because she had not seen the young man standing beside them as they entered. She was too jittery, too nervous. She needed to calm down and as she watched him disappear through a silver door far to the other side of the room she again considered making an excuse to leave.
“

"Dinner will be ready in a moment," Iason assured and waved towards the sofas. "Won't you sit?"

Carrie nodded, settled on the opposite sofa, touched and slightly relieved when Riki settled next to her, instead of Iason who returned to his own seat. "I guess you've gotten settled in again after our adventure?" she said, in an attempt to make small talk.

"More or less," Iason returned as Cal reappeared with a tray of three drinks, two glasses of wine and a glass of amber liquid that she assumed was a fermented liquor.

"I've mixed the remedy in with your drink," Cal offered as he turned the tray to present her with the glass. "It should not change the taste of the wine."

“Thank you,” she returned quietly and accepted the drink, then watched Riki grab the amber glass and Iason took the second glass of wine. She took a sip and her eyebrows rose at how nice it was. “It’s very good.”

“Iason likes his wine,” Riki smirked as he sat back and draped his free arm over the back of the sofa, though not close enough to touch her.

“I do,” Iason agreed easily, “However Riki prefers a baser, less pure alcohol.”

Riki shrugged and sipped his beer. It wasn’t so much a matter of taste, but the fact that during his training Iason had often mixed aphrodisiacs into wine and forced him to drink it. He never touched the drink after that.

“Where is your lady friend, Yielia wasn’t it?”

“Sleeping. She’s not used to the hours here yet.”

So much for some additional female support, Carrie thought and sipped her wine. Unable to keep up the farce that this was just a simple visit, she decided to take a chance and put her cards on the table. “So what is it you wanted, Iason?”

Iason’s eyebrow rose. “We can discuss that at dinner...”

“I’d rather do it now.”

“Are you in hurry?”

“I just want to know why I’m here.”

“To have dinner, of course.”

Carrie reached forward and set her wine on the table between the two sofas. “You’re a Blondie of Tanagura, and as much as I appreciate you allowing me to remain friends with Riki, I sincerely doubt you can be bothered to be social with a lowly merchant unless it serves a purpose for you.”

Iason was impressed, because anyone else would have assumed that he had invited her strictly for the purpose of socializing, or perhaps in gratitude for her assistance during Riki's kidnapping, which was admittedly part of the reason at least.

He also sat forward and placed his wine next to hers, ending the façade between them. "You have been of great assistance to Riki and I recently," he began, watching her closely. "I would like you assist me once more with an issue I have."

Carrie ignored the spike of fear that went straight to her stomach and straightened her shoulders. She could not allow herself to be placed in that horrible position again. "And if I refuse?"

"You would do so without hearing my request?" Iason challenged. "Does that seem wise?"

Was that a threat, she wondered? He was still speaking calmly, but then she'd rarely seen a Blondie be anything but calm or cordial. Considering how formidable their reputation was, it made sense that they were not required to show agitation or anger. Why get upset when no one could go against you? She'd seen Iason upset on Avalon, but that was over Riki and been a different scene altogether.

Riki, confused by the sudden atmosphere sat forward as well. He thought Carrie liked Iason, and vice-versa, so what was with this sudden tension between them. There was no question that Iason had asked Carrie here because he needed her to do something for him, even he knew that Iason didn't do anything without a purpose or benefit to himself, but he was startled by Carrie's sudden cageyness.

"What's wrong?" he asked her, worried that she might accidentally, or perhaps deliberately piss off Iason and if she did that the Blondie might order Riki to stop seeing her. The promise that she had asked him to make in the corridor suddenly worried him. Carrie had always been bold and confident and sure of herself, but now she was pale, really pale and he had never seen her like this. "What are you afraid of?"

Carrie flinched and picked up her wine again. “I just want to know what to expect, that’s all.”

Riki looked at Iason and then back to Carrie, torn between his Master and lover and the woman he had come to deeply care for. Was she afraid that Iason would hurt her, is that why she was so obviously upset? Riki didn’t think that would happen, Iason seemed to be fine with Carrie being around him, and she had helped to save their lives. Where were these feelings coming from?

“Very well, I would like you to reveal yourself to someone.”

Carrie’s biggest fear was realized and she finished off her wine, before answering. “Why?”

“He is a Blondie and has recently gone through some complicated procedures. He is not responding as anticipated, so I had hoped the sight of something unique and surprising might assist his recovery.”

“You can’t ask her to do that, Iason.”

Both Carrie and Iason glanced at Riki.

“Can’t I?” Iason countered.

“Did you forget what she told us? Her kind was hunted to extinction and she only revealed herself to help us!”

“It is one Blondie, Riki, in an enclosed and secure environment...”

“I can’t take the chance that it wouldn’t somehow be recorded or passed on to others,” Carrie countered, pleased with Riki’s rush to her rescue, but concerned it could get him into trouble. “I don’t regret showing you and Riki what I am, Iason. It was the only way to help you, but I can’t do this favour for you. I’m sorry.”

Carrie held her breath, knowing that Iason could easily threaten to reveal her regardless for not helping him. When neither he nor Riki spoke, her fear continued to climb, as did her regret. She realized that she did not want to

lose her Pride. She did care about Riki and Iason and she didn't want to have to leave them. "You both mean a lot to me, but I can't do this for you."

"Do you not trust me?" Iason asked, quietly.

Carrie couldn't lie to him. "I want to."

"Yet you do not. Are we not part of your Pride? Does this title mean nothing then?"

"You are, and it means everything, but..." Carrie glanced at Riki, expecting him to be hurt by her confession, but his expression remained one of concern and she felt some of the nausea in her stomach ease. "It's very difficult for me to truly trust anyone, Iason. I'm sorry but I am being honest here. Too much has happened for me to give such a thing so freely."

"As I share this characteristic, I understand your concern and will not fault you for it, however I have given you my word that I would not betray your confidence in this matter."

"I know, and I believe that, but you want me to reveal myself to another Blondie, one that I cannot hold to that same promise. It's too much of a risk, Iason. I'm sorry."

Carrie was not a fool. Although she had only been on Amoï for a couple of years, she still understood the rules on this world, and one of those rules was that refusing a Blondie's request was not done. It could result in the loss of her merchant license, banishment and in some cases, according to rumors, disappearance of the offender.

She rose and glanced at Riki, full of regret at the idea that she might never see him again, and wondered how things had become so complicated? "I'm sorry, Riki."

"Why..." Riki began but Carrie was already moving towards the door. He rushed forward and blocked her way. "Why are you leaving?"

"You know why."

“No, I don’t!” He looked over Carrie’s shoulder toward Iason, who had also risen to his feet. “Iason, tell her to stay.”

“Riki, don’t...” Carrie began and tried to push past him to the door. How could he not understand the slight she had made to Iason and the danger it put her in? He’d lived in this world longer than she had, so he had to know the repercussions of her actions.

“I accept your decision,” Iason said quietly from behind her, just as Cal appeared and announced that dinner was ready. Iason stepped forward and extended a gloved hand to Carrie. “Let’s not put Cal’s efforts to waste.”

Carrie stared at Iason’s hand and then lifted her gaze to his, still hesitant. What did it mean, she wondered, that he accepted? Was he offering her a final dinner before he brought the boom down upon her? She hated being afraid of him, she’d learned not to be afraid of anyone and beyond that she really, really liked Iason. But it was fear and not adoration that crawled into her heart and scrapped at her belly.

Riki stepped around her and down to the next level. He took Iason’s outreached hand, then grabbed her hand as well so he had hold of them both.

“Come on, Cal’s a really good cook.”

“Riki...”

“It’s better to listen to him,” Iason suggested mildly. “He can get very moody when he does not have his way.”

“Shut up,” Riki snapped at Iason and then started to pull them both towards the dining area. “We’re having dinner and that’s that.”

Carrie could do nothing but follow as she was tugged across the living area and up three steps to the a formal dining area where Cal had laid out three place settings at the end of a beautifully elegant table.

“Did you call Yiel?” Riki asked as he settled on the right side of the table.

“Miss Yiela is still sleeping,” Cal advised as he held out the chair at the head of the table for Iason and then moved around to the left side, opposite Riki’s position, and did the same for Carrrie. “I will prepare a plate for her to eat later.”

“Bring us a bottle of the Yelden Seven,” Iason requested as Cal removed the covers from the steaming dishes. “In honour of our guest.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Cal disappeared again and Riki rose from the table, he glared at Iason. “If you let her leave the only thing you’ll be getting from me is teeth marks.”

“Oh, really?” Iason smiled slowly. “I do like a challenge.”

“Fuck off.” Riki pointed at Carrie again. “Stay.” Then he followed Cal through the entrance that led to the kitchen.

“What are you going to do?” Carrie asked Iason the moment Riki was out of earshot.

“Why, to keep you here of course, as I was so boldly ordered to do.”

“Iason, let’s just end this now. You owe me for helping you, so let me walk away.”

“Now you are sounding like Riki.” Iason’s gaze narrowed. “I have no intention of allowing you to leave us, Carrie, at least not until you have explained why you cannot accede to my request.”

“I’ve already explained why!”

“Not well enough. I understand that you fear discovery, however I do not believe my request will put you in danger.” Carrie opened her mouth to protest and Iason continued before she could speak. “Furthermore, it annoys me that after everything you professed to me, everything you have done for us, that you still do not trust me.”

“It’s not like I want to be this way, Iason, but in my experience...”

“You have been betrayed in the past?”

“Yes.”

“By those close to you?”

She nodded. “By people I cared a great deal for and who I thought cared for me.”

“I see.” Iason tugged on one glove, straightening it over his fingers. “So you would lump us in with those people, despite the fact I have only shown you acceptance and support? I have allowed you to keep contact with Riki, against my initial concerns at the time, and I believe I even thanked you for your part in our rescue from Avalon. Is that not enough to warrant your trust?”

“You’ve been extremely generous,” Carrie agreed honestly, because in this dystopian world Iason’s actions had been beyond reproach for any normal Elite. Still, she felt the sting of his words in the deepest part her heart. “But you don’t understand. You can’t possibly understand why I have to be this way.”

“Then help me to understand.” He reached for her hand, grasped it and held it beneath his on the table. “Carrie, I do not idly allow people into my private life, yet I have done this for you.”

“I know, and I appreciate that, but...”

“I have done this because of the support you have offered Riki, and also myself. I have offered my friendship not as a bargaining tool, but as reward for what you have done for both of us. If I did not consider you in this way, then yes, I would force you to do as I bid, but I will not do this. I wish this to be a favor, between friends, and no more than that.”

Carrie stared into the pale blue eyes of the Blondie and thought about how others perceived him, how she herself had perceived him upon their first meeting. His gaze could be cold, frigid in fact, but she saw only warmth in those eyes now. They had faced kidnapping, injuries and the risk of death

together and she truly respected and admired him, yet the wall of mistrust around her heart was so thick that she didn't think anything could penetrate it.

"I want that friendship, Iason," she admitted, quietly. "I do consider you and Riki family, and I don't mean to be disrespectful, but I know how things work here and I know how things tend to work out for me. People that I trusted, deep through my soul, betrayed me; I cannot always have confidence in the feelings I have for others."

Iason could understand her predicament, as he had faced betrayal himself several times. First with Orphe, then with Issac. He could not deny that trust was a commodity that he did not offer lightly, and because of this he could not fault Carrie's reluctance to take him at his word. However, he was Iason Mink, the Blondie of Tanagura, and once his word was given it was never revoked. It was not just a matter of pride to him that she did not accept it, but of some deeper emotion that went beyond offence or annoyance; it was a new feeling that he had never experienced before.

There were few, of even his own kind, that he truly held admiration and respect for, but Carrie was one of them. Not because only because she had beaten the odds and survived being the last of her race, although that in itself was quite an accomplishment. No, he liked Carrie because she had challenged him over Riki, had informed him, in no uncertain terms, of a side of Riki that he had been unaware of. She had shown no fear of him at that time, and it bewildered him that she would show it now.

He should let her leave, he decided, if being here frightened her. However, he found that he did not wish to give that command. Only recently, when he had run the risk of losing it, did he realize that he was enjoying their little family. He and Riki, Cal and Katze, and now Carrie. She was part of their group, and he enjoyed the idea of having such a family too much to give it up.

"You are feeling vulnerable," he decided. "I too have felt that way on occasion."

“You?” Carrie asked, startled. “You’re a Blondie, what could you be afraid of?”

“You already know the answer to that.” He squeezed her hand then released it. “You witnessed my fear and vulnerability when we were on Avalon.”

Carrie thought back to their experience and her expression softened. “Riki.” Iason’s biggest, and possibly only fear was the loss of Riki. “I can understand that.”

“Because he is part of your Pride?”

This time Carrie reached for Iason’s hand. “You both are.” She realized what a mess she had made of things and how her mistrust had somehow hurt him, because despite what the rumors were, she believed that even a Blondie could be emotionally hurt. “I...May I tell you my story? And after hearing it, maybe you’ll understand why I can’t help your friend?”

“I would very much like to hear your story, Carrie.”

She nodded and quickly released Iason’s hand as both Cal and Riki reappeared. Cal moved around the table and started to fill their glasses with the wine that Iason had requested, with the exception of Riki who still had his beer, as Riki set an additional covered plate, set of utensils and a wine glass.

“Is Yielia going to join us after all?” she asked.

“No.” Riki pulled the chair beside him and taped Cal’s shoulder, as the boy started to move away. “Sit.”

Cal paused, startled. “I beg your pardon?”

Riki plucked the bottle of wine out of Cal’s hand and filled the extra wine glass he had brought in and set it before the additional service. “Sit and eat with us.”

“But...I’m Furniture!”

Technically he wasn't anymore, but Riki didn't want to argue. "You did your duties as Furniture, now you're my tutor, so sit your ass down."

Cal's panicked gaze moved to Iason, who simply stared back at him, then finally nodded. Cal reluctantly settled in the chair beside Riki and once he had Riki immediately sat down and turned his attention to Carrie.

"Did you guys make up?" he demanded as he picked up his fork and glanced at Iason, who as a rule, had to start eating first.

"I believe we were on the cusp of reaching a mutual understanding," the Blondie advised as he slid a piece of succulently marinated meat into his mouth. "Just before your attempt to put your tutor in the Medical Centre."

"He's fine." Riki looked at Cal who was sitting stone still and staring straight ahead. "Right?"

"I...don't think this is appropriate, Master Riki," the young man confessed quietly, unwilling to admit that he had been thrilled to be invited to sit at the table and share a meal with them, however he was still wary of food; even that which he prepared himself. His stomach simply rebelled at the very idea of it. "For me to sit at the meal table and..."

"Oh, is that what's bugging you?" Riki stood up, grabbed his plate and utensils in one hand and his beer in the other. "Then let's move somewhere else." He had stepped out of the dining room before anyone could protest.

Cal looked at Iason and Iason looked at Carrie, his eyes dancing in amusement. "I blame his behavior on you," Iason told her and received a small smirk from her in return. "I suppose he will sulk if we don't follow." He smoothly slid back from the table and picked up his wine. Cal bolted from his seat to pick up Iason's plate, unable to consider that his Master might actually take it away from the table himself!

"I'll bring a tray, sir..."

"No need." Iason took the plate from him and picked up Carrie's wine in his other hand, easily holding two full glasses between his long fingers.

“Coming?”

“Absolutely!” She grabbed her plate and utensils, and felt a bit of the pressure and anxiety that she had been carrying since that morning ease a little more. “I hope we have cake for desert,” she told Cal, trying to snap the boy out of his dazed stance and urge him to follow. “Riki says you make the most amazing chocolate cake.”

“I...It’s a simple recipe, Miss,” Cal stammered, hating that he couldn’t regain his composure. “Anyone could make it.”

“Not according to Riki.” Carrie’s heart went out to him, for Riki had told her what had happened to him because of their former Furniture. “It’s obvious he cares very much for you, sweetheart, much more than just a Furniture or a Tutor.”

“I...I care for Master Riki as well, Miss, only...”

“He’s had a rough time of it lately, so let’s let him have this break in decorum and enjoy a friendly, easy dinner, what do you think?” Carrie hoped Cal would agree because it was obvious that the boy also needed a break from reality, and maybe two or three chocolate cakes to fatten him up; he was much thinner than she remembered. She thought of what had happened to him, and memories of her own past filtered in. “I’m going to tell a story, I think it’s one you should hear.”

Cal opened his mouth to reply and then flinched with Riki barked his name from the other room.

“We’d better go in.”

He nodded and grudgingly picked up his plate and wine glass. When they entered the living area, he saw that Riki had piled a bunch of the sofa cushions around the low table between the two sofas and now sat on the floor by the table, his food in front of him and his back settled between Jason’s legs, who had opted for the sofa and was balancing his plate in one hand while he ate with the other.

“Come on, the food is getting cold!” Riki insisted.

The relaxed atmosphere did even more to dispel Carrie’s misgivings about being here. She immediately kicked off her shoes and plopped down on a section of cushions, crossing her legs over each other as she set her plate on the table next to the glass Iason had already set there.

“This is much nicer,” she grinned at Riki and was thrilled when he grinned back.

“Except for the stuck-up Blondie behind me who refuses to sit with us and OW!”

“I will do many things for you, my love, but sitting on the floor is not one of them.” Iason released Riki’s hair and slid his fingers through in a caress. “Though I do approve of your current position.”

Riki slapped Iason’s hand away but the fingers were back a moment later and running through his hair affectionately. “Cal, sit.”

“Stop barking at him, Riki.”

Riki tilted his head back to look at Iason, startled. Was that what he was doing? He just wanted Cal to eat with them. He straightened and looked at the young man who had demurely knelt upon the cushions beside Carrie and was now staring at his plate. “Am I pissing you off?” he asked

“No, of course not.”

“Then what’s the problem? Is it really such a big deal for you to eat with us?”

“No.” Cal couldn’t explain his behavior or why he felt it was wrong to eat with them.

Sometimes, before Bean had been hired and Orphe had tried to kill his Master and Riki, Riki would often eat in the kitchen with him when Iason was working late. Riki claimed he didn’t like eating alone, and so Cal would fix them a simple meal and they would chat over what they did that

day. Cal had enjoyed those times and had gotten past the inappropriateness of it, but to eat with Iason and a guest in the main dining area, atop the fact that food was currently his enemy, it was just too much.

“Just do what you can,” Iason advised Cal as he slid a morsel of his food into his mouth. “It’s excellent, as expected of your skills.”

“Please eat,” Riki added quietly. “I know it’s hard, but you can’t keep starving yourself...”

“I’m hardly doing that!” Cal snapped and then lowered his head appalled. “My apologies. I...I did not mean to speak...” He blinked as Carrie suddenly took his plate and exchanged it with her own then did the same with their wine. He lifted his questioning gaze to her.

“I don’t know about the rest of you, but this smells too good not to eat.” She immediately tucked into her meal, nodded in approval and nudged Cal with her shoulder. “Delicious, well done you.”

Riki also began to eat, hoping that Cal would do the same if he felt he was unobserved. He was only slightly annoyed when Iason reached forward for his wine, which he had placed on the table next to Riki’s own glass, caught Riki’s chin and dropped a quick kiss to Riki’s lips.

“You were going to tell me your story,” the Blondie reminded Carrie as he took a sip of his wine, then set it back on the table, and snuck a second kiss before settling back on the sofa and resuming his meal.

“Yes,” Carrie agreed and again tried to ignore the knotting in her stomach; just as she was getting relaxed, she thought morosely. She hoped that she was doing the right thing. “Before I do,” She lifted her eyes to Iason’s. “I need to know if you will...” She wet her lips and tried to think of the most diplomatic way to phrase her question. “If there will be any repercussions for my refusing your favor?”

Riki turned to scowl at Iason, who continued to hold Carrie’s gaze. He’d push the limits several times already this evening but he knew that this was something he couldn’t interfere in,

“Before I do,” Iason mimicked. “I must ask what would your actions be if I say yes?”

“Iason!” Riki snapped before he could help himself and received a warning look from the Blondie. He faced forward and stared down at his food, before he made the situation worse, but he vowed that if Iason chased Carrie away he’d never forgive him.

Carrie was surprised by question, because obviously she would cut and run, She lowered her eyes to Riki who was now watching her. Or would she? The idea of leaving and never seeing Riki again...Her gaze moved back to Iason’s and she realized that she would miss him as well. They were already her family, damn it.

Iason’s eyes seemed to mirror her thoughts, and held knowledge of her decision; before she had made one. He knew that she could not leave Riki any more than he could.

“None,” she whispered and dipped her head, because it was the truth.

She was so tired of running away and starting over in a new country or in most cases, new planet. Never being able to settle in a permanent place, or allow anyone to get too close to her. Always being suspicious of people, and refusing invitations for dinner or sex or both. She would never have a spouse, or children, never have real friends or a home.

Riki watched, appalled, as Carrie’s shoulders started to shake and then glanced up as Iason rose, stepped over him, pulled Carrie to her feet and into his arms.

“I...I’m so tired,” she murmured as she clung to the hard, firm Blondie. “I don’t want to run anymore. I want to stay, please let me stay.”

“Yes.” Iason was oddly touched by Carrie’s confession and he cradled her against him, as he had sometimes done with Riki when his beloved had a nightmare. “Stay here. Stay with us. No more running.”

Cal jumped up and hurried off to the kitchen, then was back a moment later with a very tiny glass.

Iason took the glass and pulled back slightly to look down at Carrie. “Drink this, it will calm you.”

“Sorry.” Embarrassed, Carrie wiped at her wet cheeks, accepted the drink and drank it down in one shot. Despite her earlier misgivings, she trusted that the drink would not be doctored with any kind of harmful chemical. “I’m so sorry. I’ve never done this, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” Riki muttered, although he was equally embarrassed at seeing her in such a state. It made his chest hurt to see tears on her cheeks.

“Would you like to lay down, Miss?” Cal asked kindly offering her some tissues.

Carrie accepted the tissues, shook her head and pulled away from Iason to compose herself. She glanced down at Cal’s plate and noticed he had eaten over half of his meal already. “Was it good?” she asked him with a small smile.

Cal, confused by the question, followed her gaze and blinked in surprise that he had eaten so much without even being aware of it. He had found himself caught up in their dialogue and had forgotten to be afraid of the food. “Yes,” he returned simply.

“Then finish it up,” Iason ordered mildly and watched Cal settle back at the table.

She looked back up at Iason. “Maybe this isn’t the best story to tell while we’re eating.”

“I doubt any of us will be put off our food by a story,” Iason returned, his eyes moved to Cal. “We’ve all lived through some gruesome things ourselves and survived.”

Cal was unaware that everyone's gaze had moved to him for a brief moment, as he was more intent on complying with his Master's wishes and eating the food before him. It was not as difficult somehow, he realized, eating from the plate he had served up for Miss Carrie than trying to eat from the one that Riki had served up for him. He wasn't sure why exactly, but the fear was less.

"You don't have to tell us anything else," Riki decided as Carrie settled across from him again and Iason returned to his seat.

"Yes, she does," the Blondie decided. "But let's finish our dinner first."

Gratefully, Carrie did just that, but she didn't enjoy the food as much as she should have. The drink he had given her had helped mellow her anxiety, but there was still a golf ball sized lump in her throat. This was just a delay, she would have to explain things to them, but she appreciated Iason's allowing her a moment to gather herself again.

Once they were done, Cal took their dishes and asked if they wished for desert to be served, to which Iason declined, then chuckled at Riki's wounded expression. He wanted to hear Carrie's story first. Cal nodded and excused himself, but Carrie caught his sleeve.

"I need cake," she decided. "This will be much easier with cake." Actually, she was beyond full, but she wanted to make sure that Cal returned so he could hear her story.

"I will bring you a piece right away."

"Hey!"

All three looked at Riki, who scowled at Iason.

"Fine, you can have a piece," Iason conceded. "Though how you will fit it after that marvelous meal..."

"There's always room for cake," Riki muttered and winked at Carrie when he turned back around.

Carrie started to rise and found that her legs had fallen asleep. Age really was catching up to her. “Well, shit.”

Riki smirked, rose and lent her a hand. Once she was upright, and had released a very undignified grunt at the action, she poked him in the chest. “Not a word out of you, kid.”

“What would I say?” He returned innocently as he plopped down next to Iason, deliberately keeping a distance between him and the Blondie for even thinking of not giving him cake, but Iason hauled him closer almost immediately. “Prick,” he muttered but pulled his legs up and tried to get comfortable.

“Okay, so here goes.” Carrie settled on the opposite sofa, took a few deep breaths, and began. As I mentioned before, my people were hunted to extinction.”

Cal returned with a small hover tray, upon which he had placed a whole cake, several plates and the wine they’d had at dinner. He refilled their glasses first, then carefully cut two pieces of the cake. He handed the first one to Carrie, who immediately handed it back to him.

“You eat that one, it’s too big for me,” she said. “I want a smaller piece.”

Cal only hesitated a moment before he set the cake back on the tray and sliced her a smaller piece, which she accepted, and a fork. He started to cut a large chunk for Riki, but spotted Iason’s gaze and the two fingers he held up and halved it. Again, Riki glared at Iason, but accepted the plate and fork; he’d get seconds later anyway. He knew this was Iason’s punishment for him acting out earlier, and as punishments went it wasn’t too bad.

Cal paused, as if unsure what to do, then took the piece of cake that Carrie had given back to him, slowly settled down at the other end of the sofa where she sat and sent the hover-tray back to the kitchen. He glanced at her and saw she was smiling at him, then he slowly cut a piece of the cake with his fork and slid it into his mouth.

Content that Cal was eating again, Carrie also took a bite of her cake and rolled her eyes in pleasure as the delicious, moist taste of chocolate melted on her tongue. “Oh my God! This is unbelievable, Cal. You are such a great cook!

Cal flushed but kept his head lowered. “Thank you, Miss.”

“Where was I?” Carrie asked and Iason reminded her. “Right, extinction. Well, before we got to that point, a small group of us managed to escape and set up a colony on another planet. The problem was that there were very few females who made it out and so our men tried mating with some of the local women in an attempt to increase our numbers.”

“They were Humans?” Iason guessed and glanced down adoringly at Riki who had already finished his cake and was practically licking the plate.

“They were Eyet.” A species very similar to Humans only they were all born with red hair and green eyes. She had inherited only the eyes and lighter skin of her mother, which darkened when she was in her cat form. “Unfortunately, the breeding experiment didn’t go well,” she continued. “I was the only one who survived, and only because I was born in a more Humanoid state; my cat side came out later. The other children were in their feral forms and...”

A Dakfure’s memory began from the time they were born, and she could vividly recall being pulled from her mother’s womb, cleaned and spoken over. She couldn’t comprehend the words, but she did remember that her mother refused to hold her. Afterwards, she was placed on some sort of grassy bedding, and to her left she could see the torn remains of a dead woman beside her, who, she had been told years later, had gone into labour just a few minutes before she had come into the world.

“You can trust us, Carrie.”

“I know that.” Now, she added silently, but she had never revealed her past to anyone, not the full truth of it. “The reason the other babies didn’t survive was because in their feral form, once they reached six or seven

months, they instinctively ripped themselves out of the womb, killing both the mother and child.”

Riki’s eyes widened. “Then how did your kind breed at all?”

“Between two Dakfure it’s different. With a Human, you the child can sometimes hear sounds or voices outside of the womb once they reach a certain stage in development. With a Dakfure child, our instincts and hearing are highly tuned, so we can hear such things at a much earlier stage. Also, because the children are born feral, there is a necessity to calm the babe from the earliest months of pregnancy. Also a Dakfure female produces a certain type of hormone that automatically calms the baby, and there is an internal sound new mothers make that can drown out all other sounds and keep the child in a relaxed state.”

“As the Human mothers did not have either of these, is the assumption that the off spring rebelled inside the womb?”

“To an extent, yes. We have some Humanoid qualities, certain etiquettes and social graces that are taught to us from a young age, but we are not born that way. We are born only with instinct and a deep seeded need for survival.”

“You were the surviving child out of how many?” Iason asked, more curious than horrified by the details.”

“Maybe a dozen.” She reached for her fresh glass of wine and sipped, ignoring the impulse to gulp it all. “They would have stopped after the first two, but several of the women were already pregnant and they didn’t want to end the pregnancies if there was a hope that one of them would survive.”

“Why were so many impregnated at the same time?” Iason asked. “Was it against their will?”

“No, well not exactly. My kind goes into a kind of heat period and these people were...” She lowered her head. “Incentives were offered,” she said. “They agreed to help carry the children, which would then be taken into the Pride and the women were free to go about their lives.”

“Did they know the dangers of cross breeding?”

“There were risks, of course, as with any interspecies breeding, but no one could have predicted how truly dangerous it was. There was no way to know that a Human’s anatomy would be so different from us when it came to giving birth. After the first few died, many women tried to abort their unborn fetuses, but this is strictly against our laws, and so they were sedated and kept calm until...” She trailed off again.

“Until the children ripped their way out.”

“There was still hope that some might survive.” She took a deep breath, knowing that her people had basically murdered those women by not allowing the abortions. “You have to understand how desperate they were. There was so few of us left with only two females, and they were just children themselves, still.”

“It is a difficult choice for anyone to make,” Iason agreed. “And you were the only survivor?”

“Yes.” Carrie glanced at her wine glass. “Do you have anything stronger?”

“Cal,” Iason began and almost smiled at the sight of his empty cake plate. There was a small smudge of chocolate that lingered at the corners of the boy’s mouth. “Bring the Cira Perdue.”

Riki’s head swiveled to glare at Iason, because that was the liqueur that he’d gotten very drunk on not long ago and suffered the worst hangover in his life. “Why?” he demanded.

“I think Carrie will enjoy it.” Iason caught Riki’s chin. “And you can certainly attest to its strength.”

“Fuck off,” Riki muttered.

Cal rose, collected their plates and other glasses; his own glass of wine had been left untouched and stepped away. He returned a moment later with

three small glasses and the familiar thin bottle that Riki had once stolen out of the liquor cabinet.

“I don’t want any.”

“It will be fine if you don’t drink it all at once,” Iason teased Riki, as he accepted his glass then watched Cal pour one for Carrie, who took a tentative sip and looked at Iason surprised. “What do you think?”

“It’s very nice.”

“It’s got a kick,” Riki warned pleased when Cal set the bottle on the table and settled back on the sofa. “Watch yourself with it.”

Carrie nodded, took another sip and let the smooth flavor tease her tongue and slide down her throat. She could taste the potency almost immediately and felt her nerves relax a little more. Enough, at least, that she could continue her story. “My birth mother tried to abort me twice before she was caught and sedated, but for whatever reason I endured. Then, when I was born, my mother survived but I looked Human. My Pride thought I was also a failed experiment, and gave me to the woman to raise. Unfortunately she was afraid of what I might turn into, so she snuck back into our village and left me in the fields.”

Riki felt his anger grow and poured himself a glass of the liqueur, despite his promise not to touch it again. He could not help but notice the comparison between his childhood and Carrie’s. While she had been given away, he had been taken, but they were still essentially abandoned by their parents.

“I was lucky that my people changed their mind, for while it was acceptable to give up a child to its mother to care for, it was morally impossible to leave that same child who had been abandoned altogether, and so they accepted me into the Pride,” Carrie continued, quietly. “None of them would admit to being my father, perhaps they truly didn’t know as they had lain with multiple women, but it became the oldest member’s duty to care for me.”

Carrie slowly smiled as she remembered the aged Dakfure with hair that had turned silver and his lovely black stripes faded to a deep grey. Kysrrs had lost his mate, daughter and her mate and their cubs in the attacks before they had escaped to Rarin 4. He was very much a loner among the Pride, and no longer respected as a valued member as only the strong were respected. Survival of the fittest was their way, but that did not mean they discarded an old cat or a young cub just because they were weak.

“We fled from that planet, because we were constantly under attack from the locals, due to the deaths of their women, and because they were right to hate us for what we did. We finally settled on a small jungle planet in the Nova system. There I learned the ways of my Pride, but I found the lessons difficult because of my Human form. I didn’t know that I could even change into a Dakure, but I worked hard and was determined to be able to keep up with my Pride. Eventually I learned to run and climb and hunt. I respected the laws of nature and the Pride, but I was still Human.”

“Sounds like fun,” Riki snorted, knowing it must have been anything but.

“Sometimes it was, Kysrrs was old and couldn’t move as well as the others, but he taught me many essential skills. I still had to use a weapon to kill an animal for the daily meal, but I managed and the Pride accepted the kill as if I had done it with my teeth and claws.”

“Why did you leave them?” Iason asked. “Or did they abandon you?”

Carrie shook her head and took another hit of the liqueur. “I was nine when the hunters invaded the village. We had lived there peacefully for almost a decade, as it was remote enough that we rarely saw any other Humanoids. There were a couple of local tribes, Tree Hangers we called them because they lived high in the trees. They were mostly foragers, but our village was far enough away from them that they never bothered us and we left them alone as well.”

She finished off her cake, needing something to moisten her suddenly dry mouth, then set the empty plate on the table. “Occasionally there would be an off-world traveller that came to for the purpose of hunting or to get samples of the fauna, but we always kept out of sight of them. Someone

must have seen one of us, because one day an army of men descended upon us. We had no warning, and no way to defend ourselves against sedation guns and laser weapons.”

She took a deep, heavy breath, knowing that when she closed her eyes tonight she would see the massacre of her people as she had so many years ago. The screams of her people, the scent of burned flesh and blood, so much blood as the hunters immediately moved in to skin a fallen Dakfure the moment it was down.

Kysrrs had ordered her to hide beneath the fire pit in one of the dens, the pits were dug almost four feet down so it allowed for heat to rise but no flames to catch on anything inside the den. She could still taste the leftover ash he had covered her with, and the weight of the wood and boughs that he'd piled atop her. For hours, she'd lay curled inside the pit and waited for the screams and sounds of battle to die down. She waited for Kysrrs to return for her, but he never did. No one did. When the smallest sliver of sunlight lit the den and managed to nudge its way into the fire pit, she realized that no one was ever coming back for her.

When she'd finally climbed out of the pit, her legs and arms were cramped from being in one position for so long. It took her awhile to crawl out of the den and when she did, she been devastated. The break of dawn showed the true horror of the night before. Bloody carcasses littered the village, skinned from their heads down to their feet by the monsters that had attacked them.

In a daze, she walked through what was left of her Pride, tears streaming down her cheeks because she could not recognize any of them. The faces had been burned away after they had been skinned, it all looked so unreal.

She remembered shuffling up the small hill towards the large oak tree that she and Kysrrs often had their lessons under, and spotted a figure by the base, leaning over. For a moment she had thought one of her kind had survived, but then the figure straightened and held up the long sheath of the Dakfure he had just skinned; still dripping with blood.

The rest was shrouded in darkness, and she could not recall, even to this day, exactly what happened. Her next memory was of the torn and shattered

bodies of the four remaining hunters that now lay next to her kin, and the taste of their physical remains in her mouth. She'd had claws, and a tail and long hair over her entire body that was now matted with blood.

“Carrie?”

She glanced at Iason, startled and realized that she had been too far lost in that nightmarish memory. “I...Sorry.” She reached for her drink and, ignoring Riki’s warning, tossed it back. “I haven’t thought about any of this in years.”

“You can stop if you want...” Riki began, understanding how difficult it could be to discuss the past, especially one you where you could not control your own fate.

“No.” She took a deep breath. “I’m okay. My people were murdered but I survived because I hid. Afterwards I left the village and tried to find a place for myself.” She decided to leave out the fact that she had tracked down the Judas who had betrayed them and had ripped him apart with her new claws and teeth. “I managed to smuggle myself onto a ship that was leaving the system.” She shrugged. “I don’t remember how many years I wandered, but I was careful to keep my Dakfure side hidden. Then one day an Earth woman who was enjoying an excursion with her family spotted me stealing some food. She decided to take me home with her.”

“Did you look Human at the time?”

“Yes, I didn’t have much control over my form at first, but it seemed that the side of me only came out when I was afraid or threatened.”

Riki thought about the power that the Queen an Yiela had claimed he had, it seemed much the same thing. It was odd having so much in common with Carrie. “So, what happened with her.”

Carrie smiled finally. “They became my Pride, my family. For the first time I had a mother, a father, a sister and even a grandmother.”

“Where are they now?” Iason inquired.

Carrie's smile faltered, but not completely. "I don't know. They raised me until I was about twenty, and around that time I met a very handsome young man who I became very intensely involved with. Eventually, as things progressed, I decided I had to tell him the truth about myself. He was... well...shocked to say the least and said he needed time to think, which I gave him. About a week later he called and apologized and asked if we could meet to talk. So I went."

Carrie reached for her empty glass, now out of habit, and smiled as Cal quickly rose and refilled it for her. She took several sips, stared at it, then took two more.

"He betrayed you," Riki guessed, based on her expression and behaviour.

"He was a gambler, he had debts," she reasoned quietly. "He hadn't wanted to do it, but when he let a drunken slip out to one of his bookies at a bar, they did some research and learned what I was." She shrugged and took another sip of her drink. "I was in love, stupidly so, and I walked right into their arms."

"You obviously escaped," Iason stated.

"Yes, obviously." Carrie nodded and stared at the pretty coloured liquid inside her glass.

It was the truth, she had escaped, but not before the people who held her captive humiliated and taunted her beyond reason. Lane had promised to come back for her, she just had to pay his debt and they would let her go. He would be waiting he said, but she knew in her heart it was a lie. She'd tried to pretend that what Lane had told them about her was wrong, that she was just an ordinary, Human woman, but they found ways to make her change, and then they tried to keep her in that state for days.

When they were done 'playing' with her, they sold her to a geneticist lab where she was poked and prodded and pricked with every contraption available. They tested her pain threshold, as well as her emotional range. They forced her into impossible situations where she had to use all of her strength to escape from them, only to be shot with a sedation dart and wake

up strapped to an examination table the following morning; ready to start the experiments all over again.

She pleaded with them to release her and all they gave her were false promises. She did everything they asked and then they just continued to demand more. It was agony, to be in captivity and treated like a lab rat. She'd almost preferred to go back to the brutality of the thugs that had initially captured.

Through her months of captivity Lane never came to see her, never tried to help her and she realized he truly had sold her to pay for his debts and walked away. She'd thought maybe her Human parents would try to find her, or the police, anyone, but no one ever came. She was on her own and acknowledging that had finally given her the strength to escape.

She hadn't wanted to kill anyone, had been doing everything in her power to avoid it, but these savages were not going to release her until she was dead, and then they would probably skin her and cut her up for parts, just like the Hunters had done to her Pride. So, she escaped, and left a bloody trail behind her.

The first thing she did was try to get back home, but when she did she saw that the police were there and her father was agreeing to contact them should she come back. Betrayed again! How could they just give her over without knowing the whole story? Granted, the news showed that Carrie was wanted for the murder of several prominent scientists. They said nothing about what the scientists had done to her, or that their deaths had been in self-defense.

So she had waited until the police left and then she snuck in through her bedroom window and quickly packed some clothes and essentials in a bag. It was then that her grandmother had found her, and because she had given up on everyone and everything, she turned prepared to fight her way through. But her grandmother cried at seeing the scars and dried blood on her, and she pulled Carrie into her arms and held her tight.

Her grandmother gave her what money she had, it was enough to buy an off-planet ticket at least, and the holo-globe. She told Carrie that she could

never come back, because her parents would not understand what happened, but she wanted Carrie to live free and be well.

So Carrie left, what choice did she have? She ran into a few smaller issues in other places, enough that she had to leave again, but she'd been here a couple of years now and had established herself as a small-time trader. It was enough to eke out a modest living, and to pay for a very low-end apartment just outside of Tanagura. It was very damn little, but it was hers. The apartment, her stall and wares. It was all she had and she didn't want to have to give everything up again.

"Fuck me."

Carrie was startled by Riki's voice and her head shot up to see that the handsome young man that she had become so fond of was openly crying. She glanced at Cal, who's own eyes were glistening, and then at Iason who's expression was grim. Oh God! Oh God, had she voiced her thoughts? Had she told them everything that she had been remembering?

"I..." she began, appalled at the idea, she didn't even remember speaking. The liqueur must have loosened her tongue too much! "It wasn't...I didn't..."

Riki crawled over and settled between Carrie's legs as he had Iason's. He put his hand on her leg. "Carrie," he managed, his voice rough with emotion then he lay his head on her lap. "Carrie."

"It's okay," Carrie wiped at the single tear that spilled from her left eye and placed a trembling hand on his head. "I'm okay."

"I want to kill them," Riki growled as his hand fisted. "I want to kill all of them, every last fucking one of them!"

His threat touched her heart but also frightened her. "I didn't mean to go into detail, I'm sorry. I'm okay, really. It was all a long time ago."

"What of the man who betrayed you?" Iason asked, offering Carrie a way to move past that horrible part of her story. "Did you seek revenge?"

She shook her head. "Pathetic, right? I didn't even think about going after him. He had always been weak, I'd just refused to see it and let myself succumb to his charms. I should have known better."

"What about your parents?"

"It was easier for me to leave, safer for them and for me."

"Have you ever been back to see them?"

"No. I don't even know if they're still alive, but it doesn't matter. I can't ever go back." She lifted her gaze to Iason. "But I will go forward. I will do whatever I have to do to survive."

"There will be no need of any drastic action," Iason assured. "I will tell no one of your lineage, and I will find another way to help Issac."

"Why don't you get him a pet?" Cal suggested, quietly.

Everyone stared at him surprised.

"He is hardly in any shape to respond to a pet..." Iason began

"Not a Human one, an animal pet." Cal looked at Riki. "Like that lizard that you bought Riki? Something that he has to take care of himself, or it will perish?"

"He'd probably let it die," Riki grumbled but Carrie disagreed.

"You know, it's not a bad idea," she encouraged. "On Earth, they often used animals in convalescent homes and with coma patients."

"Animals are filthy creatures," Iason returned. "They are below the notice of a Blondie and certainly not worthy of being cared for."

"Hey, I've known some pretty filthy Blondies," Riki retorted, suddenly on board because Carrie agreed to it. "It can't hurt to try, and it would certainly be different than anything else he's used to."

“He’s not used to anything, and that is the issue,” Iason stated. “He does not respond to anything enough to recover to a normal state.”

“May I visit him?”

Everyone turned to see Yielā standing on the upper platform of the living area.

“You’re supposed to keep a low profile,” Riki reminded her.

“Yes, however I am well trained in psychology and physical therapy. I may be of some assistance to him.”

“He is not one of your local tribesmen,” Iason scowled. “He is a Blondie of Tanagura and beyond your scope.”

“He is another machine, like you?”

“Artificial life form or Elite might be a better term for you to use,” Carrie suggested with a hint of warning after seeing the glint of temper in Iason’s eyes, at least if the girl wanted to keep living. Really, she couldn’t see how anyone could mistake Iason as cold and unfeeling, he was an open book if anyone bothered to read his eyes.

“He has an organic brain?” Yielā continued. “Which is to say that he does and should feel many of the same emotions a normal Humanoid might. If you will allow me to spend some time with him, I may be successful in getting him to respond.”

“It couldn’t hurt to try, Iason,” Carrie reasoned. “She’s defiantly something he would be curious about, and sometimes that’s all it takes to start someone’s recovery, is a healthy dose of curiosity.”

Iason studied Yielā for several long moments. “I will consider it,” he finally said and then nodded at Cal. “Fetch her dinner.”

“Yes, Sir.” Cal rose and once again felt his sleeve being tugged. He looked down at Carrie. “Did you need something, Miss?”

“Can I get another piece of that fantastic cake?” she asked. “Just a teensy bit bigger than the last one?”

“Of course. There is ice cream as well, would you care for some?”

“Yes!” Riki’s eyes lit up as he leapt to his feet. “I’ll help.”

“You just want another piece of cake,” Carrie teased.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

They headed off and Iason’s intense gaze never left Yiela as she followed them to the kitchen. Finally, he turned his attention back to Carrie. “Would you like to freshen up?”

“I would, thanks.” Carrie wiped at her face, no doubt she looked a fright, but when she stood she swayed a little and Iason instantly rose and caught her arm. “Riki was right, that stuff does have a kick.”

“Would you like to lay down?”

“No, I’ll be fine once I get some sugar in me to soak up the alcohol.” Carrie lifted her gaze to his, then reached up and placed her hand on his cheek. She knew Blondies usually detested being touched, but Iason seemed to be the exception, at least with her. “I’m sorry about ruining the evening.”

“It has not been ruined. You needed to tell your story and I needed to hear it, so I could truly understand your misgivings.”

“Still, I shouldn’t have gotten so...” She shook her head, so ashamed at having revealed so much. “It was more than I had intended to tell.”

“That happens sometimes when there is a great need to tell it,” Iason said. “May I ask, have you ever spoken of your past to anyone else?”

“No. Never.”

“I see. I am honoured that you chose to share it with us, and I give my word that it will never go any further than this room.”

“Thank you, Iason. Really, thank you for everything, all of it. For the first time in...well, ever, I feel like I have a home and a Pride, and I can’t tell you what that means to me.”

He surprised her by dropping a kiss on the top of her head. “It is satisfying to count you as my friend, Carrie, and as a member of our little family. I hope we will never disappoint one another.”

Touched beyond words, she could only nod.

“You will find the washroom up the stairs and to the left. I’ll have Cal make up a room for you to sleep in.”

“You don’t have to...”

“I am not Human,” Iason stated. “However, I’m not completely indifferent to their ways and feelings. You should not be alone tonight, and nor will you be.”

She took a deep, satisfying breath, then suddenly threw her arms around him. “I love you too,” she whispered, then broke away and darted up the stairs before he could see the flame in her cheeks.

Iason chuckled, then engaged his wrist unit. He scowled when Katze didn’t answer, then remembered that the Black-Market dealer was on vacation. He left a message for when Katze returned that he wanted to know everything there was to know about a Lane Debower.

Chapter 26

Summary for the Chapter:

Yiela tries to learn more about Riki's power

“Riki, there is a call for you from Avalon.”

Riki glanced up from his book, surprised and felt an odd tightening in his stomach. “Take a message.”

“It is Queen Celestia, she says she will wait on hold until you are available.”

“Why?”

“Perhaps because you have not taken or returned any of her earlier calls.”

“I never said I would,” Riki growled as he rolled to his feet and stalked to the main communication terminal.

He sat down in the chair and stared at the swirling colors that showed a call on hold. He reached for the switch to reestablish the connection then pulled his fingers away. Why the hell were his hands sweating? What could she possibly have to talk to him about?

“Cal!”

“Yes?”

Riki flinched in surprise to find the young man standing behind him. “I need a glass of...” His eyes narrowed as Cal handed him the water he had already prepared. Riki took it and drank it down, then handed it back. “Thanks.” He glanced at the screen then turned back and grabbed Cal’s arm as he was about to walk away. “What...what do I say to her?”

“Hello would be a good start.”

“This isn’t funny! I really have nothing to say to her. Why can’t you just tell her I’m busy?”

“I have, and I told you her response. We cannot keep the main terminal tied up indefinitely, Riki. Master Iason would be very annoyed.”

“Then just disconnect the call!”

“That would be horribly rude!”

“Not really...”

“Then you disconnect it.”

“I can’t!”

“Of course you can, just say end transmission or hit the end key.”

“I know how, you little fucker,” Riki growled and watched Cal’s eyebrows rise.

“Insulting me will not help your case, Riki.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it.”

Cal nodded. “Just say hello and ask why she is calling. Once that is out of the way you can say you have to go and end the transmission politely.”

“Yeah. Right. I can do that. Okay.” Riki turned back to the terminal. “Just ask what she wants. Well, I know what she wants, she wants me to come back to Avalon.” Or maybe they had finally realized their mistake, that he really wasn’t her son and she was calling to say she would have no further contact with him because he really was just a pet and a mongrel.

He rubbed his hand over his stomach, startled when it started churning and then cramping. His heart started to pound and he thumped his fist on it to calm himself. What the hell? What was wrong with him? If he wasn’t her son that was a good thing, right? A great thing in fact. It took out all the

complications from the last few months. But if he wasn't then what the hell was he? Who was he?

His stomach cramped again. Maybe he was just hungry? "Ca..." he began and spotted a small plate of finger food as well as a beer set on the desk in front of him. "Stop that!"

"Never," Cal returned calmly and turned so that Riki couldn't see him smile. "I am here to serve."

Riki smirked, more than a little pleased that Cal was slowly getting back to normal. He grabbed up a piece of cheese and popped it in his mouth. "Okay. Okay. I can do this." He took another bite of cheese and several long swallows of beer. Clearing his throat, he pressed the key that would release the hold and the beautiful mahogany shaded face of the Queen of Avalon appeared on his screen.

"There you are!"

Her smile was brighter and more dazzling than the rings of Thayrus 3.

Riki felt his chest constrict and the words stick in his throat. Regardless of what he had confessed to Carrie, this *was* his mother, he knew it without a doubt every time he saw her. His body responded to her as it did to Iason, only in a different way. He felt immediate warmth spread through him, chased with an unfamiliar anxiety.

Finally, he managed a response. "Yeah."

"Thank you for taking my call. Have you been well?"

"Yeah."

She nodded. "You look rested. I am sorry to say that you always seemed exhausted during your time here."

And who's fault was that, Riki wanted to say but bit his tongue. Being kidnapped and dropped on an alien planet, then told your entire existence

was wrong and had been horribly changed by some cruel fate- who wouldn't be sick from it?

“Yiela has informed me that you are doing well in your lessons.”

He and Yiela had only really talked about Avalon as yet, and had made no efforts towards discerning this supposed power he had inside of him.

“Why?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Did you just send her here to spy on me for you, to send you reports? If that's the case, you can take her back...”

“No!” Celestia assured quickly. “No, of course not. I have merely asked after you on her calls to me. She has only given me general information, Riki. She has betrayed no confidence.”

“She works for you, so why wouldn't she?”

Celestia studied him for a moment. “No, my love, Yiela is not mine. She is of course under the house of the Royal family and must adhere to our rules, but Yiela has only ever been meant for you.”

“What, like my slave or something?”

“No. She was to be your teacher, your protector and above all your friend and confidant. It is important to have someone that you can trust to always be on your side and that is Yiela.”

“She doesn't even know me.”

“She has known you from the day you were born...”

“That isn't who I am! Why can't you accept that?”

Celestia's lips pressed together in annoyance. “I have accepted that, Riki. If I had not I would never have allowed you to leave your home a second

time.”

“You couldn’t stop us...”

“You have no idea what I could have done, Riki, or what I chose not to do. I do not fear your Master’s creator. I was born a warrior and I am the Queen of Avalon. The only fear I have ever known is when we lost you, so do not underestimate me.”

Riki felt as if he’d been caught by Iason sneaking an extra piece of cake and he didn’t like it one bit. “Is that a threat?”

Celestia sighed. “Of course not. Why would I threaten my son?”

Riki shrugged, uncomfortable. This call was not going well at all. “So... what does she tell you?” he asked, hesitantly because now he was curious.

“She has mentioned that you seem well adjusted in your life there, if not as happy as she would like, but she understands that it is a different culture. She says that Iason treats you well and that you are coming along in your studies. That is all. Just assurances for a worried mother and nothing so life changing.”

Riki felt foolish now for having made a big deal over it, but damn it he didn’t know these people and he didn’t like anyone talking about him. He briefly wondered if he should mention his change in status, but realized that it probably wouldn’t mean anything to her. He still belonged to Iason and he would still reside on Amoi.

Her words didn’t indicate that Yiela had made mention of the incident with Bean, or the fact that Riki and Iason had gone off on her a few times. He still felt bad about that, but it appeared she was not reporting to the Queen anything he might be embarrassed by.

He paused. Wait, why would he feel embarrassed anyway? He barely knew this woman and he didn’t answer to her. Who was she to make him feel ashamed or awkward or any of that shit?

“Riki?”

He glanced at the screen again and tried to calm his chaotic thoughts.

“What?”

“Is Yielā adjusting? She says she is but I worry. She was wearing the most bizarre clothing when last we spoke.”

Riki couldn't tell her that if they hadn't covered Yielā up with proper clothing that she would either be mistaken for a pet or possibly assaulted. “It's just the way we dress here.”

“I see. Well, she is acclimating then?”

“I guess.”

“And do you have any questions for me? Anything I can help you understand that Yielā could not?”

“No.” Riki saw the disappointment in her face and cursed her for again making him feel like shit. “I have to go.”

“So soon? Can we not visit for a longer moment? It is the first time you have accepted my call.”

“Stop it!”

She blinked, startled. “S...stop what?”

“Making me feel guilty! You don't have the right to do that! You're no one to me, do you get it? I don't give a shit about you and if you don't like how long I talk to you then stop fucking calling!” He ended the transmission then dropped his face in his hands. “Shit! Fuck! Cock sucking...” He curled his hands against his forehead. He'd hurt her. Her face had gone almost white from his words. He hadn't meant to do that, he just wanted to end the stupid call.

He finished off his beer and turned to see Yielā standing quietly in the living area, watching him. Guilt speared him again and he turned it into

rage. "Are you spying on me?"

"No. I am not."

"You better not be!" He rose and stalked past her to the balcony to light a cigarette. He heard the rustle of her garments as she stepped up and moved to stand beside him. He puffed on the cigarette for a moment then offered it to her, surprised when she accepted it with a small bow of her head and inhaled deeply.

"HMMMMMM."

"You smoke?" he asked surprised.

"Is that what you call this?" she smiled and returned the cigarette to him. "We have something similar, a form of plants and spices that we inhale for meditation or relaxation purposes. It often helps to center the body when there is much stress."

Riki turned back to the view of the city, that was kind of how he used it too. "What does it taste like?" he asked curious.

"I have a small pouch. Would you like to try it? You shared yours with me, I would be happy to do the same."

"It's not gonna get me blasted or something, is it?"

"Blasted?"

"Wired, wierded out, start seeing stuff and shit?"

She shook her head. "It is not a hallucinogen, it is meant for relaxation."

"Maybe later."

"As you wish."

"Yiela?"

She nodded to him.

“Um...I didn't mean to yell at her like that.”

“I know that.” Yielia's expression softened. “As does she. Do not let it trouble you so.”

“I'm not troubled or...anything.” No way could he admit that he was concerned that he had hurt the Queen's feelings. “I just...I didn't mean it, that's all.”

Yielia nodded. “Shall we do something to take your mind off of it?”

“Like what?”

“Test your powers. If we you have an area that is away from view we should begin the analysis.”

“I don't think you'll find any analysis.”

“We cannot know until we do.”

Riki stared at his cigarette, polished it off and dropped it in the recycler. “Fine, but I think you're wasting your time.”

Two hours later Riki was beyond frustrated. “Nothing,” he growled. “Are you sure it's even real?”

Yielia nodded her head. They were in what Riki called the recreation room, in the lower level of the condo. Riki had been hesitant when they first entered the room, especially at the idea that he actually had any power that had to be hidden away from view, but she reminded him that if he did not learn to control his power, he might make an accidental display that could cause trouble for him and Iason.

It was enough of an argument that Riki agreed, however, after almost two hours, there had been no sign of the strange power that had affected him on Avalon.

“This is stupid,” he decided. “Are you sure it was me? Maybe it was something on your planet that did it. Maybe...”

“The power comes from inside of you, Riki. It was inherited from your mother, the Queen. We simply have not found the trigger to activate it.”

“I never had it before you people kidnapped us!” Although that could be a lie, because he remembered his conversation with the Queen before he left Avalon and how the power could have manifested during Dana Bahn and with the incident with Orphe. “Where does your power come from? Why do your hands glow green when you use it?” He remembered that the Queen’s power also seemed to manifest in that color. “Is all power like that green, like yours and the Queen’s?”

“I have simple magic, Riki, as all Humanitarians do, however when I became your Eadbarde the Queen enhanced my abilities with her own power, so I might better protect you. Thus, it manifests within the same spectrum of light and may appear similar in appearance to you.”

“So, if I got this power from the Queen it should be green?”

“Logically, yes, however your father, The King, was also a powerful wizard so it may be different altogether.”

“I think maybe I have used it before,” he admitted and explained the two instances.

Yiela listened quietly, but her heart broke that her Prince had been through so much turmoil. Her next words surprised her. “Are you happy here, Riki?”

Riki snorted and picked up one of the billiard balls out of the pocket, he rolled it along the table. “As opposed to what?”

“To being unhappy?”

He shrugged. “I am what I am and this is what it is.” He retrieved the other balls and set up the table for a game. “What difference does it make?”

“The difference is that I believe you would be happy on Avalon.”

“We’re not on Avalon.”

“No.” Yiela watched him rack the balls then pick up a cue stick. He was very good at avoidance when it came to discussing his feelings. “What were you feeling during those instances when you suspect your power may have surfaced?”

“I don’t know. Afraid I was gonna die, I guess.”

“So fear?”

“What else?”

“Was the fear for you or for another?”

He made a shot and sank a colored ball. “Who knows, fear is fear, isn’t it?”

“No. Riki, the Queen believes that you have the power of Love, which means that for your power to activate, it must be triggered by an intense feeling for someone you care for.”

Riki walked around the table and made another shot. “Maybe I just love myself a whole lot.”

She chuckled. “That is a good feeling to have. I do not believe it would be enough to trigger a power that has lay dormant for so long. May I ask, were you ever placed in perilous positions before?”

“Before what?”

“Before you met Iason.”

“Sure.” Riki leaned down and sank a yellow ball. “I grew up in Ceres, my life was in danger daily.”

“Were you frightened during those times? Truly frightened?”

“Sure, maybe.” Was he? He couldn’t recall being seriously frightened since the first time he’d been raped as a child. After that it was more anger than fear.

“You do not know for certain?”

“It’s Ceres. It’s filthy and dangerous and there are almost no rules. Everyone is out for themselves and survival is the only thing that matters.”

“It sounds like a very desolate place to live.”

“I guess.” When he missed the next shot, Riki realized that he couldn’t concentrate on the game, so he slid the cue across the table and leaned against it, and folded his arms. “What does it have to do with anything?”

“I am just saddened that your life has been filled with so much misery.”

“Yeah, well, don’t be.” He didn’t need anyone’s pity, not even Yiel’s.

“How does it relate to my power? If it works when I’m afraid, I would have been glowing green all over the damn place in the slums.”

“Yes, which is why I believe there is a different trigger.”

“But what? Pain?” He thought back to the two situations.

With Orphe he had been in pain, but again he’d been more pissed than afraid and the power, if that was what it was, didn’t show up until he was outside the compound and Orphe was trying to escape.

At Dana Bahn, he had been in pain because of what Guy had done to him, but his decision to go back to Iason had left him with no doubt. He hadn’t been afraid of being burned alive, because he knew that once he smoked that Black Moon cigarette Katze had given him he’d feel almost nothing.

“Would you allow me to help you recall those feelings?” she asked kindly.

“How?”

“Have you ever heard of hypnotism?”

“No.”

“It is sometimes used as a process to allow a person to relax enough that they can recall suppressed memories. It can be very effective.”

Riki didn't want to remember those times, he had just finally stopped having nightmares about them. Hadn't Jupiter also probed his mind in a similar way, to help him remember his origins? That had been very uncomfortable and very invasive. It left him no control over what he was saying or feeling.

“No,” he decided. “I don't want to do that.”

“Very well, perhaps if we...”

“I don't want to talk about this anymore.”

Yiela nodded. She noticed whenever it came to Riki discussing or admitting to his inner most feelings he shut her out. It was reasonable, however, for he did not know her well. She would have to be patient and earn his trust, and could only hope that there were no future incidents with his power.

“What would you care to talk about?” she offered gently.

Riki shrugged and moved over to the sofa, he dropped down. “Why did you become a...whatever you are?”

“An Eadbarde? It was my destiny.”

“What does that even mean?”

She smiled. “I means that when I was a young girl it was discovered that I had the qualifications for an Eadbarde and therefore I became one.”

“So they made you do it?”

“They? I do not understand what you mean.”

“Whoever told you that you were qualified, they told you that you had to be one.”

Yiela tilted her head as she tried to ascertain his meaning. “I was not forced to be an Eadbarde if that is what you are inferring. My gifts were discovered at an early age and I was asked if I wished to join the program. Of course, I agreed.”

“Why?”

“Why?” she repeated, again confused by his question.

“Why of course? What if you wanted to be something else, like a...a...” He had no frame of reference to continue in regards to what jobs were available on her planet for women. “A dancer?” he offered and winced at how lame it sounded.

“I am a dancer,” she smiled. “As well as a cook, a nutritionist, a musician, an athlete, a homemaker, a diplomat, a teacher...”

“How can you be all of those things?” Riki demanded in disbelief.

“They are all part of the training of an Eadbarde. We must, at any moment, be able to see to any and all needs of our charges. This includes, ensuring they have a proper and balanced diet, educating them on varied subjects such as politics, history, and the fundamentals of learning. We teach them the varied arts as music, painting and dancing, as well as assist them with maintain a healthy and fit body.”

“Like Furniture?” he asked.

“Furniture.”

“Yeah, like what Cal does. He knows a bunch of that stuff too.” He decided not to mention that Furniture were also trained in sexual stimulation, because he really didn’t want to think of Yiela offering to stimulate him.

“You call the young boy Furniture?”

“Yeah. They’re trained from the age of six to look after Elites.”

“Elites? What is this word? Your lady friend also used it.”

“Blondies, like Iason, and others like him.”

“They serve these Elites then? These, children?” Yiela could barely hide her disgust. How appalling! To use children as slaves! Children should run free and play not be running a household and slave to a machine!

“Yeah.”

“How long have they been doing this?”

“Forever, I guess.” Riki shrugged. “It’s just the way things are here.”

“Do you not find it sad for such things to be this way?”

“It is what it is. Being sad or upset about it doesn’t change the way things are.”

Yiela nodded and realized that this was the cusp of Riki’s emotional issues. He had been forced to bury so much of himself and his feelings for so long, because the world he lived it could not be changed, at least not by him.

“I chose to be an Eadbarde. It was an honour to be accepted at one.”

“So you’re like Furniture.”

“No, Riki. We were not taken from our families and forced to serve others. I was free to leave at anytime before the bonding.”

“Bonding?”

“The Bonding is a ritual that took place two days after you were born. Our energies, our souls if you will, were merged into one, so that I could feel what you feel and could find you wherever you might be.”

Riki stared at her. “But you didn’t find me.”

“No. A child had never been removed from an entire planet where it had bonded with an Eadbarde and so I could not find you, however I...” Yielā hesitated about telling him of the pain and sorrow she had felt at his disappearance, or the joy that had been instilled in her at his return. “I am sorry that I failed you, Maku.”

Riki lowered his eyes, he had not meant to make her feel bad over it. His head suddenly shot up. You said you can feel what I feel. What exactly does that mean?” He thought of all the times that Iason had taken him since they had returned, she hadn’t been feeling that, had she?

As if knowing what he was thinking she smiled. “When you were young, yes, I could feel everything. When you were happy, when you were sad, when you were hungry or hurt or just feeling mischievous. It was essential so that I could properly see to your needs, even when you could not communicate them.”

“What about now? As an adult?”

“As an adult the empathy weakens, to allow the child, or rather, the man to have privacy. I can still feel if you are pain or if you are truly angry or distressed.” She would also be able to feel if he were really happy, and it saddened her that she had not yet felt that emotion from him. “I cannot feel the things Iason does to you in your chamber and I cannot read your mind, if that is what concerns you.”

Riki released a breath, relieved, then had another thought. “Have you ever done it?”

“It?”

“Had sex.”

“No. We must be pure to become an Eadbarde, and we remain so until death.”

Riki stared at her, aghast. “So, you’ve never, ever had sex?”

“No.”

“What happens if you do?”

“I will explode into dust, of course.” His eyes grew wide and she laughed in delight. “There is no consequence to remaining pure, my dear one. It is simply a matter of you cannot miss what you have not experienced.”

Riki glared at her for playing him, then smirked. “Yeah, I guess. It’s the same with Furniture, they have never had it and can never have it either.”

Yiela’s eyes twinkled. “And does Cal grow horns and dance under the moonlight because of it?”

“Anything’s possible, I never know what he’s doing unless he’s right in front of me.”

She chuckled again. “Perhaps you would like to try my Seamage now?”

Riki nodded, relieved to be off the hook for his lessons at least, and he had to admit it was getting easier to talk to Yiela. “Yeah, sure. Let’s do it.” He blinked when she looked at him. “Smoke, not, you know, sex.”

“I am relieved,” she returned, impishly.

Iason returned home and handed his cloak to Cal who held a slightly worried expression. “What’s happened?”

“Miss Yiela and Master Riki are in the playroom.”

“Oh?”

“They seem to have ingested a local herb from Avalon and it has had a... startling effect on Master Riki.”

Iason was across the living room and taking the stairs down to the play room before Cal could completely finish his sentence. He could hear music playing and...was that...laughter? He burst into the room, nostrils flaring at what that woman might be doing to his beloved and was surprised to find Yielá sipping a fruity drink and smiling as Riki prepared his next shot on the pool table.

Riki turned, spotted Iason and his face lit up. "You're home!" He tossed the pool stick to Yielá, who caught it surprisingly easy as he darted over and wrapped his arms around Iason's neck, bringing him down for a long, sensuous kiss. "Welcome back."

"Riki?" Iason asked warily, pulling back and studying Riki thoroughly. There was none of the usual tension in Riki's body and his face showed genuine pleasure. His dark eyes were completely clear and his smile... Riki's small, shy smile was almost Iason's undoing. "What has she done to you?"

"Who?"

"That woman. Why are you like this?"

"Like what?"

Compliant, pliable, friendly, affectionate, like a pet, but Iason could not say any of that because it would offend his lover. "Different. Are you intoxicated?"

"Nope." He took Iason's hand and pulled him over to the pool table. "Watch me make this shot. It will blow your mind." He accepted the cue stick from Yielá and made a banking rebound shot that sank three balls. "Woo Hoo! I *am* awesome!"

Iason caressed Riki's cheek, then stared at Yielá. "What did you give him?"

"Don't be mad at her!" Riki ordered as he pulled away and walked over to the small glass bowl with a pile of leaves and herbs in the bottom. Beside it was a long ornate stick with a curved bottom. He watched Riki place a

portion of the concoction in the curved section, light it and inhale, then walked back to Iason. "Try it."

Iason accepted the pipe, watching both of them warily, and put his lips to the end. He inhaled the essence of the strange blend, detected three types of herbs but could not recognize the plant or type of spice.

"Is this a narcotic or hypnotic?" he demanded.

"It's for meditation and calming and stuff. It's home grown, right?" He glanced at Yielia who nodded but kept her wary gaze on Iason.

It is called Seamage," she stated quietly. "I do not understand the word narcotic, however this works with your body chemistry to assist in relaxation. It can be smoked, as we are doing, or placed in a shell or bowl and allowed to smolder to permeate the air with the scent. It is found in many homes in Avalon."

Perhaps this was why so many of the locals on that planet seemed so happy and content, Iason wondered, they were always stoned. He turned his concerned gaze to Riki again.

"I'm fine, Iason," Riki assured. "I just feel good for the first time in months."

"Explain?"

"It's like it fogs my brain, or maybe clears it, I dunno, but all that shit that's been rolling around in there for months suddenly...isn't. It's like I was overthinking everything before and now I'm not. I don't feel upset anymore, or angry or anxious. I'm just feeling good, energetic and just really good."

"So it is similar to a sedative? We have plenty of those, here."

"No. Those things make me groggy and muddles my brain. I can't think at all with those. This is different." He touched Iason's arm. "Don't be mad.

It's the first time in...well since I can remember that I feel so calm. It's almost like I was back in Ceres."

Had living here really changed Riki's emotions so very much? Was he really incapable of feeling relaxed in Eos? His lover had said many times that he hated this place, but Iason had assumed it was because he didn't feel free here. Now he had more freedom but he still did not feel comfortable.

"I do not approve of you taking foreign concoctions, Riki. We don't know what they could do to your system."

"You don't mind so much me taking foreign objects though," Riki teased as he hip bumped Iason flirtatiously, before walking around the table to make his next shot.

"You missed the last one, Maku, is it not my turn next?" Yielia reminded Riki, kindly and smiled when he handed her the cue stick. To Iason she said. "Seamage is entirely natural, it can do no harm." She made her shot and sank a stripped ball. "Many of my people use it daily, while others only occasionally. It is not a suppressant so much as a clarification herb. I would never do anything to harm Riki."

"Still, I don't want him taking it again until I have had it analyzed."

"You may take the remaining portion, if this is what you require to settle your concerns, you are more than welcome to it."

"Don't do that, Iason," Riki asked quietly. "It's no different than me smoking and it's all she has left."

"Riki, this is very different..."

"No, it's not. Smoking eases my nerves but is bad for my body. This eases my nerves and my mind, and is actually good for me. How can you complain?"

"I am not complaining, I am merely concerned..."

“Riki, allow him to take the rest and have it tested.” Yielā handed over the cue, as she had missed her second shot, since she was still just a beginner. “It will ease his mind.”

“But then you won’t have any left!”

Yielā had confessed to Riki that she had been using small portions of the Seamage every day since she arrived to calm her own nerves in such a foreign land. He knew how it felt to be afraid and trapped and he didn’t want her to have to deal with those feelings without something to make her feel better.

“I have adjusted more than I realized. I will be fine without it.”

Riki looked back at Iason. “Only take a little bit then.” He tapped the pipe. “Take what’s left in that and leave the rest.” He lay his hand on Iason’s chest. “Please, baby, for me?”

Iason’s eyes narrowed at the endearing term coming from Riki’s lips, and knew instantly that he had lost the argument. “Very well, but come upstairs. Cal will have dinner ready soon.”

“Oh good, I could eat like three dinners!” Riki linked his arm through Iason’s then did the same with Yielā. “Now, I want you two to be friends. No more bickering, no more mistrust. You’re both mine and I’m yours too, so let’s all just be friends, okay?” He released them almost as suddenly and moved to the stairs. “I hope there’s cake,”

Iason’s gaze hardened on Yielā. “He is intoxicated.”

“Perhaps, as it is his first time using it.”

“I will not have...”

“He will suffer no ill effects and will remember everything. It will not harm him.” She started towards the stairs that Riki had already climbed. “If we are to be friends, we must learn to trust one another. This is Maku’s wish.”

Iason watched her disappear up the stairs and set the pipe back on the dish, he would retrieve it later. "It is not *my* wish," he muttered in a very un-Blondie like way and moved to follow.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey everyone,

I am starting my long week tomorrow so will probably not have time to post, therefore I wanted to get this chapter up now. There are four chapters left...

However, while I did not consider continuing this beyond the 30th chapter, I have recently been having some new ideas about a possible final outcome of everything. I may be able to do a fourth sequel- Would anyone be interested in reading it if I do? I'm not sure where it will go yet, but I have several chapters written so far and it is given me goosebumps to read it, but it may only go a few chapters and I don't have an ending yet. So let me know if you would want to read it, it will probably be completely against Cannon. If not I will tie up what I can here by Chapter 30

Love!

Ani

Chapter 27

Summary for the Chapter:

Raoul and Riki are both surprised!

Notes for the Chapter:

SMUT WARNING! LOL Don't read if sex scenes make you uncomfortable. CALM DOWN those who are now excited. :-)

I'm not sure how most of you will take this chapter, but it is simply the way the story has reveled itself so I hope you will accept it and above all Review, review review!

Katze stepped out onto the balcony of the single residence cottage he had rented for the week, a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other, as he stared out at the beautiful forest that boarded all three sides of the house. He hadn't even been away from Amoï for a day and he was already so bored he could hardly stand it. Perhaps it was because there had never been a moment in his life that he just had time to himself and so now that he did, he had no idea what to do.

When he was a child his father and friends were always there to rape and beat him, but almost from the moment that he had been saved by the Emerald Jaren Nu, he had been working towards a plan to better himself, to gain control of his situation and his body so that no one could ever do what his father had done to him again.

He had gone, almost immediately, into training as a Furniture, which left little time for anything else, and while most people believed that a child relinquished all control to their master, Katze viewed it in an entirely different way.

Becoming Furniture had given him something he had never had, structure and order. It allowed him to learn and become proud of his accomplishments. He had been allowed to make mistakes, and while he had also been reprimanded he had not been beaten or starved for it. He had not been raped. Being Furniture was all about control, because you had to learn how to control your emotions, to anticipate your Master's needs, to properly run a household as well as many other amazing things that as a boy, Katze could never have dreamed of. He had all the food he could eat, a soft, warm bed to sleep in every night, access to books and computer videos and technology that would have been denied him had he stayed in that dank apartment with his abusive father. It also gave Katze the most important thing, someone to care for and in turn, someone who depended on him to care for them.

Even now, people shudder at the idea of becoming Furniture, of being castrated and trained and forced to serve one master forever, or until they got tired of you or you got too old. Katze had found only redemption and opportunity in being Furniture. It didn't matter that people had treated him as if he were invisible, because for years he had wished he could be invisible. He liked not being noticed because he knew that his Master's counted on him to make things run properly, and that was all that had mattered to him. That had given him confidence to be the best Furniture he could be.

He had served as Master Jaren's Furniture for several years, Jaren had even given him his name, then one day Jaren was sent off planet on a mission for a Blondie, he never returned. Soon after, Katze became Iason's Furniture, which had also kept him quite busy. Obviously not busy enough for Katze not to find time to hack into classified files, but even that had been part of a plan, part of working towards bettering himself. Then, as a Black Market dealer, he was inundated with requests, shipments, complaints, and dodging the legal system of Amoi. All the while still running a seemingly endless list of errands for Iason.

Eating a meal or going out for a drink was always a means to an end and usually involved finding or receiving information from someone to further his trade deals. It might look like he showed up on a spur of the moment,

but he had always planned it well in advance. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd had a properly cooked meal, one he made himself, and so his first stop after he got off the shuttle here had been to the local market to buy groceries for the week he would be here. Out of habit he put them all away in the neat little kitchen, but as yet none of it had been touched. Except of course the half empty bottle of liquor that sat on the bedside table of the bedroom he'd chosen as his own, just inside the balcony where he stood. The glass in his hand was filled with the inviting violet liquid, and he couldn't deny that despite not having much of a taste for alcohol, this one had a very exotic flavor.

Puffing on his cigarette he moved closer to the rail and breathed in deeply; he liked forests, they were so green and smelled so natural. He'd turned down his associate's offer for a seaside resort, because he didn't like water. Learning to swim had been one of his lessons as Furniture, but also it became a necessary skill to master, once he took on the new job as Iason's front man, in case someone decided to kidnap him and throw him into a river. He knew how to swim but he rarely had to use the skill because he actually hated the water. It reminded him of a soulless, all consuming beast that would come and swallow you whole, no matter how strongly you fought against it.

His link beeped and he ignored it. His more important contacts had been forwarded to this disposable link, just to keep his hand in, but he could chose to pass the communications on to one of his men unless it was urgent. The link beeped again, which meant that the caller chose to call again rather than leave a message.

"Speaking of soulless beasts," he muttered when he pulled the link out of his pocket and saw who the caller was. On a whim he answered, there was no way to trace the device, he had made sure of that. "I'm on vacation," he drawled lazily, a sign that that the number of drinks he'd had on an empty stomach were starting to catch up to him.

Raoul's pale eyebrow rose. "Are you drunk?"

"Not yet." That was mostly true, because Katze had the rest of the bottle to finish and then another fifth of illegal scotch that he intended to blow

through tonight.

He rarely drank heavily, but he was bored, and confused and maybe a little lonely when he realized that there was no one he could just call up on a whim and hang out with. And, if he wanted to be truly honest, the whole thing with Riki was eating at him.

After all their years together, always playing by the rules unless they were rules that Iason gave him permission to break, the Blondie had completely circumvented the system and made a mongrel pet into a consort. Riki had always managed to hold most of Iason's attention, but now, now he would have all of it.

Katze hated that he begrudged Riki's status change because the kid had been through hell and still managed to hold onto who he was. Katze had given up being anything but what people wanted him to be years ago. He didn't have any pride, like Riki, he hadn't cared how he was treated, as long as he had food, a place to stay and no one would be touching him or trying to screw him.

His curiosity had gotten the better of him one time and Iason caught him in it; but he never minded the punishment that left a lasting scar on his face, because that incident had changed his life forever. Becoming Iason Mink's confidant and front man for the Black Market had been an incredibly unique opportunity, so of course he worked his ass off to make sure that Iason would never regret his decision.

But it wasn't just the need to keep himself outside of Tanagura, or the façade of freedom he had acquired, it was more that he wanted to prove to Iason that in a world of expendable Furniture and pets, he alone was indispensable. Somehow, he had begun to believe his own propaganda. Iason Mink owned him, there was no denying that, and sometimes the Blondie gave him difficult and immoral orders to carry out, but Katze would do anything for Iason; not because Iason was his Master, but because it was Iason. Iason could count on him, without question and there were things that Katze knew that no one else did or ever would.

Hadn't he agreed to die before betraying even one of his secrets? Hadn't Jupiter herself used him as a communication relay to aid in Iason's recover from Dana Bahn? And what about Raoul, who said that Iason made him promise not to harm Katze? Didn't that all mean he had become indispensable? Didn't it mean that Katze was Iason's number one? That he was important?

Then along came Riki, and Katze ended up cleaning up one mess after another. Iason had almost died because of Riki, more than once, and Katze would never forget that, but he couldn't fault Riki because Iason was obsessed when it came to that particular mongrel. He didn't care about the things that they did together, whether they had sex or lived together or said I love you, none of that mattered. None of that was what Katze had been holding out for all these years.

He'd been close, so close to reaching his goal, or so he thought when they were on Avalon and Iason actually acknowledged him as a friend, but then the minute they were back on Amoi, he basically offered Katze to Raoul for experimentation, even with the stipulation not to harm him.

It wasn't fair! Riki had caused Iason nothing but trouble and yet he is basically freed from being a pet, and is now considered on Par with Iason in the social hierarchy. Which left Katze right back where he started, doing Iason's dirty work and cleaning up after Riki's messes, with no set place in this world, other than as Iason's lap dog.

"Damn it," Katze tossed back the contents of his drink as he realized he was on the verge of tears. Why couldn't Iason care about him, not sexually, but as something...more? Why couldn't Iason worry about him and want to share things with him? Why couldn't Iason be proud of all that he had done?

"Katze?"

Shit! He'd forgotten he had the Blondie on link, too caught up in his own misery. "What?"

"I've never seen you drunk."

“No? Well come on over here and I’ll give you a show.” Katze lifted his empty glass. “Lots more to come.”

“I’d be delighted, but I meant that you would not normally drink so much. Has something upset you?”

“I don’t get upset...” I’m Furniture he started to say and bit it down at the last minute.

It wasn’t even that he wanted real freedom, because he knew that after Raoul destroyed his records that he could go anywhere and do anything and probably get away with it, but that wasn’t the kind of freedom he wanted. He wanted Iason to treat him as more than just a Furniture/Black Market Dealer. He didn’t want to leave Iason, or stop working for him, he just wanted to be acknowledged, the way that Iason had done for Riki. Was that so wrong? Was it really too much to ask?

“Katze?”

Katze focused on the screen again. “Why am I still talking to you?” he demanded and could feel his tongue loosening far more than it should. He should disconnect the call, before he said something that he’d have to pay for later, but he was suddenly so damn lonely. He didn’t have any friends, none of his associates even knew his real name. He truly had no one else to talk to. “Are you coming or what?”

Raoul’s eyes seemed to darken and he leaned closer to the screen. “Tell me where you are, I appear ill-equipped to trace your transmission.”

“Awww, really? You’re a smart guy, Raoul, fucking figure it out.” Katze leered at the screen. “If you can find me I’ll give you anything you want, and even give you see something you’ve never seen before.”

“I will hold you to your word,” Raoul warned dangerously. “Do not run and stay awake for me.”

Katze laughed. “Run? I’m not afraid of you. I’m not afraid of anyone.” He smiled at the screen. “Come and get me you twisted, mothefucker.” He cut

the transmission abruptly and felt the fear crawl through him and what he had just done. Challenging Raoul was tantamount to suicide, but he was safe. The transmission signal was so well scrambled it would take the best hackers over a week to pinpoint a location and by then he'd be long gone.

He lit another cigarette. No, Raoul wouldn't find him and he still had several days of his vacation before he had to go back. He took another drag of the cigarette and slowly blew it out, hating himself for actually hoping the Blondie did show up.

Iason smiled as Riki sighed in his sleep and couldn't resist pulling the mongrel just a little bit closer to him. Whatever had been in that Seamage really, really had relaxed Riki so much so that his lover had fallen asleep almost right after dinner. He hadn't the heart to wake him, he knew that Riki had not been sleeping well since their return home, and that ridiculous illness he had caught on top of it had probably left the mongrel exhausted.

Iason paused as he replayed his last thoughts. Riki wasn't a mongrel though, was he? He was originally from Avalon not Ceres. It was difficult for Iason to think of him as anything other than a mongrel, Riki even still referred to himself as one. He supposed as long as it didn't bother Riki, and as long as he only thought it, the familiar term could still be applied.

He'd had a headache in the back of his head for almost a week now, and he didn't understand what it was coming from. He had run a thorough diagnostic on his systems and had a scan done of his brain, everything appeared normal. What then, could be causing the constant ache? He didn't suffer from stress, not like a Human would and he was immune to disease.

Jupiter had not called for him or Riki since her decision to change Riki's status, which was both a relief and a concern. He had assumed that She would wish to at least speak more with Riki, as She had before the fiasco

with Avalon, but his creator seemed to have put Her curiosity for Riki aside, at least for now. He should be grateful, but he couldn't help feel that something was amiss.

"Iason?"

Iason looked down into Riki's sleepy gaze. "Yes, love?"

"You okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

Riki slid his hand across Iason's chest to the Blondie's apposing arm and lightly touched the mood bracelet he had given him. Iason had refused to take it off, even in bed, because he wanted to see if it would start to change colour again. "I can see a bit of green."

Iason's eyes flew to the bracelet and sure enough there was the smallest smudge of peridot green. "What does this colour mean?" he asked, suddenly blanking on the definition, which was another cause for concern, his memory seemed to be getting muddled, which was impossible.

"It means you're worried about something." Riki sat up, worried. "You should know that."

"Yes, I should, shouldn't I?"

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Perhaps my mind is simply overtaxed."

"You have been working hard." Riki agreed, then saw the surprise in Iason's eyes when he tossed a leg over the Blondie's legs and straddled him. "Does Jupiter's Favoured son want a treat from his Princely consort?"

Iason's smile was slow, almost feral. "Someone is feeling very brave."

"Is that a no?" Riki shrugged and started to dismount, only to find himself pinned against Iason's chest. "So, it's a yes?"

“I cannot deny that I find you highly arousing this way.”

“What way?”

“Under the Influence.”

Riki scowled. “I’m not! Why won’t you believe me?”

“Perhaps you still don’t realize how different your behavior is, but it is very different, Riki.”

“Fine, fuck yourself then.” Riki started to push away, but Iason’s arms squeezed around him and he found there was no room to struggle.

“Now that’s the Riki I know and love.”

“You’re a queer fella, Iason,” Riki sighed. “You prefer when I’m uptight and rude?”

“Prefer it, no, but it’s how you are and I am accustomed to it.” Iason leaned in and nuzzled Riki’s neck. “I love you, Riki, the real you. Would I prefer that you were more affectionate and amiable, yes, but under your own choice, not the inference of some strange plant.”

Riki shimmied until he managed to pop his arms out from where they had been pinned between his chest and Iason’s, and dropped his hands on the Blondie’s shoulders so he could look straight into those riveting blue eyes. “I don’t like being like that, Iason,” he admitted quietly. “It’s not fair to you that I am like that, but I can’t help it sometimes.”

“I know that, Riki.”

“I know you think I’m stoned or high or whatever, but I’m honestly not.”

Riki took a deep breath and released it slowly. He didn’t know how to explain how clear his mind was, or how, for the first time in as long as he could remember, he wasn’t filled with worry, anger or hate. Maybe he was stoned, but it didn’t feel like he was. It felt like he was finally relaxing into his role with Iason and it made him happy and relieved.

“Tell me what you’re feeling then, exactly what you are feeling so we don’t waste, whatever this is.”

Riki shrugged. “I want to be with you,” he returned simply. “I still don’t understand why you want me, why you ever wanted me, and I haven’t forgotten what you did to me, Iason. I don’t think I ever will, and maybe that’s also why I act up and get angry sometimes, but I’m doing my best to make it work because this is my life now. This is what I agreed to, once I was given the choice. It doesn’t erase the past and I’m sure as hell never gonna just be a docile, accommodating fuck doll, but...” Another shrug. “I want to be with you, so I gotta try. I don’t know how else to explain it.”

Iason’s hand slid through Riki’s hair in a tender caress, touched beyond words and so very, very happy he...

“Iason? Iason! Answer me, damn you! What’s wrong?”

Iason blinked and looked at Riki who was frantically beating on his chest and shaking him. He blinked again, turned his head and saw that Cal was also there, looking very concerned. “Riki?”

Riki threw his arms around Iason and squeezed so hard that Iason was grateful he was made of an unbending alloy. “What the fuck happened to you? Was that a joke? That wasn’t fucking funny!”

Iason hugged him back then, firmly pulled his lover far enough away to gaze into Riki’s glistening eyes. “What happened? Why are you crying?”

“I’m not fucking crying!”

“You look as though you might.”

“You were gone, Sir.”

Iason turned his attention to Cal and Riki gripped him tight again. “Explain.”

“We were talking,” Riki mumbled against Iason’s shoulder. “Just talking and you looked like you were going to say something and then you just...”

just...”

“Master Riki could not get you to respond, Sir,” Cal stated quietly. “He called for me and we have both been trying to bring you back.”

Back from what, Iason wondered. He quickly checked his internal chronometer but could find no discrepancy. “You say I was unresponsive? For how long?”

“A little over ten minutes, Sir. I was about to send for Master Raoul.”

Ten minutes of being unresponsive? Ten minutes that he could not recall and he did not detect on his internal systems? What was going on?

“I thought you went to sleep again,” Riki moaned against him. “I thought you weren’t gonna wake up.”

Iason rubbed Riki’s back and gave Cal a look that told the Furniture he was dismissed. “I am sorry, Riki.” He caught Riki’s face between his hands. “I’m here. I’m right here and I will never leave you.”

“No.” Riki surged forward and pressed his lips to Iason’s. “You can’t. Not ever.”

It scared him, truly scared him how much he had come to rely on Iason being there, being in his life now. He had never really depended on anyone before, or anything. People came and went, with the exception of Guy and his gang, but even as close as he had been to them, he had known in his heart that they were expendable to a degree, that they wouldn’t always be with him. Hadn’t he searched for a way out of the slums for that reason? Hadn’t he left his gang and Guy behind because he had wanted a better life for himself and knew he wouldn’t find it with them?

Riki broke the kiss first, something he had never done as once Iason had control he rarely relinquished it, and slid down Iason’s body. “This looks tasty,” he decided, trying to push his fears back as he gripped Iason’s large, hardening organ.

Iason's eyes narrowed in heated arousal. "Why don't you try it and see?"

His gaze never wavered as Riki took him in, licked and sucked and lapped at him until Iason was nearly consumed with need. Perhaps he should ask that woman for more of this Seamage to be shipped, he thought randomly, then quickly dismissed the idea. This side of Riki was cute and enticing, but he preferred the brutish, difficult aspects of Riki's personality, as they were more honest and easier to read.

He hauled Riki up suddenly, so suddenly that Riki's tongue was still slightly out of his mouth from where he had been using it.

"What..." Riki began, then realized what he thought was Iason's intent and started to lower his hips and prepare to be penetrated, but Iason continued to pull at him, until Riki found himself straddling the upper part of Iason's chest, instead of his waist. "What are you...?" he began and then he scowled as Iason pulled him higher still to rest almost on the Blondie's shoulders. "Why..." His eyes widened as Iason's lips closed around him, then the slammed closed as his body shuddered and surged forward of its own volition.

Iason caught Riki's wrists in one hand and held them behind his back so the young man could find no leverage other than to lean further forward into his waiting mouth. He tormented Riki with his tongue, reveled in the way Riki's hips started to hump frantically against him, and then, just when he sensed Riki was close to a climax, he pulled away and raised Riki's hips so that his tongue could seek the treasure beneath.

Riki felt his body spasm at the invasion and then winced as the action pulled at the arms still pinned behind him. "I...M...My hands...let... Ahhh!" Another spasm rocked him, but Iason must have understood because he released Riki's wrists. Almost immediately Riki's hand went out against the large headboard to brace himself, while the other dove into Iason's hair.

So good! It felt so incredibly, decadently, sinfully good! His mind had been clear before, he'd been able to focus and organize his thoughts for the first

time in an age, but now that focus has been shattered and all he knew was Iason, Iason's hands on his body, Iason's tongue inside him.

Iason stopped, again just as Riki was about to release, and the young man almost sobbed in grief, but then he was being pushed backwards with gentle hands and he cried out in relief as Iason plunged into him. Over, and over, and over again.

"Come, Riki," Iason whispered as he sat up so he could wrap his arms around his lover and feel every tremble, every shiver that Riki was experiencing from their love making. Riki cried out and his seed spilled over Iason's pale, gleaming chest, then was crushed between them as Iason's renewed vigor continued to thrust forward.

Riki wanted to say enough, he wanted to beg Iason for a break, even though they had gone far longer many times before, but this time he had been far more sensitive and Iason far more devious in his attempt to milk a response from him.

So instead of asking for a break, Riki asked for more and Iason was more than willing to oblige. He knew that neither of them would be getting much sleep tonight.

Raoul didn't bother to knock on the cottage door, he easily bypassed the security codes and threw open the door. He searched the first level, saw several empty liquor bottles, an old fashioned book open and face down on the sofa-chair, and a good portion of a well prepared meal left uneaten.

Moving to the slide-lift he stepped onto the rounded shelf and it rose to the second level which held an open concept sitting room, bedroom and wash area, with a balcony off to the side. The doors of the balcony were flung open and the breeze from outside filtered into the room.

On the bed was Katze, spread eagle and unconscious, but still fully dressed. Completely oblivious and vulnerable to attack, how very unlike him.

Raoul supposed it was too much to ask that the Human had actually stayed awake, as it took him nearly eight hours to trace the signal, and that was by using all his resources and connections. Katze was *too* good of a hacker.

As he walked over to the bed and stared down at the former Furniture, he paused at the spark of arousal that shot through him and quickly tried to dismiss it. Assuming that most of the liquor Katze had consumed had worn off, he carefully settled onto the bed next to the red-head and quietly captured Katze's wrists to pin them over his head. While Katze could not match him for strength, he was whiley and fought dirty.

"Took you long enough."

Startled, Raoul stared down into Katze's now open, and seemingly clear eyes.

"You were supposed to stay awake?"

"Who says I was sleeping?"

"Then why were your eyes closed?"

"I heard you come in and didn't want to look at your ugly face."

This brash and bold side of Katze both amused and annoyed Raoul. "Men have been killed for such remarks."

"Truth hurt?"

Raoul's fingers tightened on Katze's wrists. "You promised that if I found you, you would show me something I had never seen before," he reminded. "I am here, now show me."

Katze finally showed a moment of hesitation and turned his head sideways towards the wall clock. "How much time did it take you to get here?"

“Too much. How much did you have to drink?”

“Too much.”

“You have wasted several hours of my time already, Katze. Show me what you meant or I will show you what true experimentation can be like.”

“Is that how you talk to all your friends?”

“Is that what we are?”

“It’s what you wanted to be, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but I find it curious that you’ve had such a drastic change of heart, or is merely the alcohol talking?”

Katze’s gaze roamed everywhere inside the room except for the beautiful face of the Blondie hovering over him. Why had he made that challenge to Raoul? Because he was lonely? Because he was angry? Or was it just drunken gall? Or had he simply wanted something else to take the place of the anger, emotional pain and confusion he was currently feeling?

“I’m waiting.”

Katze turned to look at Raoul and felt a spike of familiar fear rustle through him. “Can you let go of my wrists?” he requested calmly.

“Only if you promise not to run or avoid me.”

“Why would I run when I invited you here?”

“Or try to take any life threatening poison to end your life?”

Katze smirked and looked away. “I only had one of those,” he admitted of the false tooth cap. “I haven’t replaced it yet.”

Raoul continued to study Katze and found he didn’t want to release the Human. It was frowned upon, naturally, to touch a Human in such a way, unless they were a pet, and yet Raoul could not fathom why he took a

measure of enjoyment from their current position. “I think I’ll hold on, just the same.” He was curious what Katze would use to bargain with now, the man was an inventive negotiator.

“I can’t show you what I promised to show you if you’re holding my hands.”

“I have a free hand,” Raoul advised holding up the gloved fingers of his right hand. “Tell me where to put it for you to show me.”

“Doesn’t work that way. Let me go and I’ll show you.”

They held each other’s gaze for several moments, neither giving anything away and both proving their own prowess when it came to stubbornness.

“Very well...”

No sooner had Raoul released him when Katze was off the bed and headed for the balcony. He was not, however, fast enough to outrun a Blondie, and Raoul captured and pinned him to the wall within seconds.

“You are full of surprises,” the Blondie admitted as his eyes narrowed. “But either the drinks have made you very brave or very foolish. You promised me a reward if I came, now give it to me.”

Katze didn’t bother to struggle, there were few forces in the universe that could match a Blondie’s strength. “I don’t know why I said that...” he hedged and Raoul held him to the wall with one hand at his throat. “I...I was drunk! I’m still a little drunk, I think...It didn’t mean anything...”

“Katze, you presented me with a very lovely challenge, one which had me using several resources that I could have saved for other things. I flew all this way here in the middle of the night and met your challenge, but now I am becoming irritated. You have exactly three seconds to show me something I have never seen before, or Iason be damned, I will snap your neck like a twig!”

“W...wait!” Katze gasped and clawed at the gloved hand squeezing the life out of him, as his feet dangled off the ground. Okay! Okay!” His sudden release was a shock and he was unprepared to catch himself when his feet hit the floor, so his legs automatically crumpled beneath him. “I...I’ll show you, but you...you can’t tell anyone, Raoul, not ever; not even Iason.”

Intrigued, Raoul nodded and hauled Katze up off the floor with one hand. “I give you my word, but only if it is something truly worthy of the trouble I took to come here.”

Katze caught himself as Raoul tossed him back towards the bed, slowly settled onto the mattress and stared at the floor. What the fuck had he done? What was he doing? This would be the end of him, there would be no going back from this. He held up a finger when Raoul advanced. “W...wait, just...wait.”

“I am done waiting.”

“I...I just...” With a trembling hand Katze poured the last of the scotch into the empty glass beside it. “Just...gimmie a minute.” He gulped all of the liquid down in one quick motion, wiped his mouth and set the glass back on the nightstand.

“Friends, right?” he asked, hoarsely, “Your word it stays between us?”

Raoul was growing more and more curious about Katze’s secret. The man before him was visibly shaking, stammering and avoiding his gaze; nothing at all like the Katze he knew. He wondered what could possibly be the cause of it? Even when Katze had been faced with the trauma of his past, the man had barely flinched.

“My word.” Raoul assured.

“Right. Okay.” Katze rubbed his hands together than ran them through his hair as he tried to figure a way to start. “Remember when you were asking me about whether or not Furniture lose sight of their training after so many years? If they might go against their masters or...or feel sexual desire after so many years? If it can redevelop?”

“Yes.”

“Well, the truth is that I don’t know for sure, but...well...maybe.”

“Concerning which part?”

“Well, Bean is proof that on some level a Furniture may eventually disobey his Master and act directly against their training.” Katze was scrambling for something to give him, something other than what he had promised. “Daryl did this, as did Bean and...” As had he, but Raoul didn’t need to know that. “I think maybe even with the rigorous programming Furniture undergoes, there may be certain qualities that can resurface over time and be stronger than their loyalty to their Master.”

Raoul crossed his arms over his chest, annoyed. “This is not something I haven’t heard or suspected before, Katze,” he warned. “And it isn’t what you promised me.”

Shit! Raoul was too smart for his own damn good. “I’m giving you the information you asked me for, why do you think it would be anything else...” Katze broke off as Raoul caught his wrist.

“Because you are afraid, Katze, and I have only ever seen you like this once before, when you were having a nightmare and unaware of your actions. This information is something I could have discerned for myself, and would not affect you in this way just by telling me.”

“No, but remember when you tried to kiss me and...uh...you asked if I felt anything?” Raoul took a step forward and leaned over Katze, still holding onto the red-head’s wrist while he braced his other arm on the bed next to Katze’s side. “And did you?”

“Yes.”

“What was it?”

“Fear.”

Raoul released him and straightened, disappointed. “That was clear enough at the time and we have already had this discussion.”

“Yeah, only...I didn’t tell you why I was afraid.”

“I assumed it was due to your past history. Humans have difficulty letting go of past trauma and...”

“It’s not because of my father!” Katze snapped and bolted to his feet. “Fuck! Fuck how did I get here?” He stepped around Raoul and reached for the package of cigarettes on the nightstand, only to have Raoul grab his wrist again before he can pull one out. “It’s just a cigarette, there’s nothing else in it.”

Raoul took the pack and inhaled, instantly analyzing each and every one of the ingredients. He could find no trace of any kind of poison and pulled one of the sticks out of the pack. He placed it between his own lips, lit the cigarette and inhaled to allow his cybernetic systems to detect any unusual properties. Satisfied he then transferred the cigarette from his lips to Katze’s.

“Calm yourself and tell me what this is all about.”

Katze took two huge inhales of the tobacco and wished it had the usual calming effect. “You gave me your word,” he muttered as he stared past Raoul to the open doors on the balcony, escape still very much on his mind.

“I have, but my patience is wearing thin.”

After two more long puffs Katze dropped the cigarette into the empty liquor bottle and pulled off his shirt.

“That’s very nice, but I don’t see what...” Raoul began as Katze reached for his pants and then he could only stare at the beautiful naked body before him. He had seen beautiful boys before at the pet markets and the hybrids in his own lab but this was different. Those young, prepubescent boys were almost completely hairless with pale, supple skin that was made specifically

for admiring and touching, but little else. Porcelain Dolls was what Riki had referred to them as once, and Raoul actually agreed now.

Katze's skin was a fine mixture between the pale, moonlight of a pet and the deep, sun-kissed shade of Riki's skin. A thin layer of ginger hair spread across his chest, curled around dark, pink nipples and then left a teasing trail down his stomach to the junction of his thighs. Raoul had rarely seen hair on a Human male, even with his lab experiments it seemed unusual. Raoul found his eyes following that captivating trail of hair down to Katze's navel, and studied the area that looked more approximate to a woman. Raoul realized this was what remained from Katze's castration to become Furniture.

Raoul had to admit he had only seen a Furniture naked a handful of times in the centuries he had lived, and it was almost always during a lab experiment. But the hair confused him, because didn't a Human male require certain amounts of testosterone to grow body hair? This was something that would have been denied Katze during his procedure.

"As lovely as you are," he admitted, and Katze was lovely. He had grown more muscular than most Furniture had the right to, and it suited him well. "This is not something I haven't seen befo..." Then, an anomaly happened, his mind went completely blank and his communication skills disappeared as Katze pressed a button on his wrist unit and the hologram below his waist fell away and revealed fully functional male organs.

Chapter 28

Summary for the Chapter:

Shiao and Guy explore their relationship (More SMUT for those who don't like it ha ha)

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you everyone so so much for the fantastic reviews. I know Raoul was a shock and I am so happy so many of you seem to be more pleased than displeased with it thrills me to no end. Only two chapters left. Don't worry they will involve Iason and Raoul

Shiao's eyes flew open and he immediately switched to night vision to take in his surroundings. He was in Guy's room, in Guy's bed. There was no noise other than the shuffling of the curtains by the open terrace which were moving in the breeze. He had heard someone screaming, he was sure of it and it could not have been a dream as he did not dream.

Carefully he extracted himself from Guy's arms and slipped out of bed to walk towards the open terrace, not bothering to clothe himself or hide his nakedness; as no one lived close enough to the house for them to see into the second story windows. Scanning the trees and ground below he searched for an intruder, or perhaps a large animal that may have been wounded enough to make that noise.

He spotted a few night-time creatures, a half-dozen birds snoozing in the trees and a Whaybeck turtle making its slow way towards the pond about fifteen meters in behind the trees. Nothing was out there that could have made that sound. He slowly made his way downstairs, searched every room of the house, leaving the lights off in case there was an intruder, but found nothing.

It made no sense. The scream had been, what Humans might term, blood curdling. He could not have imagined the sound, he did not have the capability for imagination. Was it something left over from his link with Iason? It was possible but he didn't recall any such memory when they had been joined. He had screams in his own memories, but this was not one of them either. This had been unfamiliar and disconcerting.

Closing his eyes, he used the silence of the house to rewind his mind and try to find the exact sound and pitch...There! He heard it again, only this was not from his memory or Iason's. What could it be?

Death to them all.

He physically jolted and his eyes flew open.

“Shiao?”

The onyx spun around and found Guy, wrapped in the sheet from his bed, standing in the doorway of the living room and staring at him with concern.

“Are you okay? Why are you standing here naked?”

“I heard a noise,” Shiao replied, because he was unusually rattled by the voice he had heard a moment ago and could think of no other response.

Guy walked over to him, looked up. “Did you find anything?”

“No.”

“Then we're safe, right?”

“Yes.” But were they? Something did not feel right. He wasn't sure what this feeling was but he didn't like it and worse, he didn't know what it meant, and that concerned him.

Guy waved him forward. “Then let's go back to bed.”

“Very well.” Shiao followed obediently but he couldn't help but look behind him, it felt like he was being watched.

From the doorway of Guy's bedroom, Shiao watched the mongrel toss the sheet back onto the bed before sliding his beautiful naked body beneath it. He seemed to be having trouble stepping over the threshold, though he knew that he was welcome to do so as they had both been sleeping there just a short while before.

Guy turned on his side to face the door and scowled. "What are you doing? Are you not coming in?"

He was beautiful, Shiao thought suddenly, this wayward mongrel with a desperate and unfortunate past. Guy had made some grievous mistakes in his young life and was working very hard to overcome them. Shiao too had made mistakes, but he did not believe making Guy his lover was one of them. He was proud that Guy wanted him in such a way, and that Guy had chosen to forgive his past and allow such a relationship. Guy showed no fear towards him, and that was what had initially attracted Shiao to him. The idea of losing him, of not having this warm, funny Human by his side caused a strange ache inside of him that he could not define.

"Shiao?"

"You are beautiful," Shiao stated quietly as he finally stepped into the room and walked slowly to the bed to settle on it facing Guy.

"You're not so bad yourself," Guy tossed back with a grin, then scowled. "What is it? Second thoughts?" He'd had a brief period of those himself, had been conflicted about what they were doing, not just because Shiao was an Elite, like Iason Mink, but also because of Riki and what Guy had done in the past.

He was not looking for love with Shiao, he knew that was impossible, but what he could accept was the companionship they had found together. Sex was great, and he was happy enough to be getting it regularly again, but it was not what defined their relationship. He just wanted to be with Shiao, because Shiao accepted him fully, despite his status and his past.

Shiao lifted a hand and caressed Guy's cheek. "Never. You."

“None.”

“Are you sure? You were hesitant before.”

“I was, but I’m not anymore.” Guy rose up on his knees and slid his arms around Shiao’s neck. “You promised to rid me of Riki’s memory, remember?”

“And have I done?”

“Not yet,” Guy admitted and leaned in to nibble at Shiao’s neck. “So, you’ll just have to keep trying, over, and over...” He started to fall back, pulling Shiao with him. “And over again.”

“It could take a lifetime, then,” Shiao said as he stretched out beside the mongrel.

“You okay with that?”

“I believe I am.” Shiao captured Guy’s mouth in a tender kiss, he was learning to curb the urgency he felt when aroused so that the sex was gentler on the Human’s more fragile body. This was made easier by the fact that Guy was in amazing physical shape, and that he always seemed to be willing to engage in intercourse, so Shiao was not consumed with the guilt or rejection he’d experienced before. “I enjoy touching you, Guy.”

“I like it too,” Guy murmured and let his head drop back so Shiao could nuzzle his throat, which was one of his erogenous zones. “I like those big hands of yours, with really long fingers and...” He gasped as Shiao obediently put his long fingers to work as they slid inside of him. “Yeah... those...those are g...great.”

“I could do this with you forever,” Shiao confessed as he lowered his head to suckle first one sensitive nipple than the other. “But you need sustenance to survive.”

“I...I got used to a l...light diet in Ceres.” Guy’s eyes closed as he arched against the Onyx and gripped his back, trying to find purchase for the

sensations rocketing through him. Not even with Riki had his body responded so swiftly and so urgently. “I...I can go without food.”

Shiao smiled and met Guy’s lips once again, thrilled as their tongues danced in the wet heat of their joined mouths. The taste of him was invigorating in a way that Shiao never experienced with actual food or drink. The tiny gasps of pleasure Guy emitted aroused him so much more than he ever thought he could be. Naturally, he knew that what he was doing, what he was feeling was wrong. He was a Child of Jupiter and should not be allowing himself to behave in such a way, and yet, all it took was a look or a smile from one fast-talking Mongrel to make him forget his programming, his routines and even his past transgressions.

“Hey...Shiao?” Guy managed through his passionate fever.

“Hmmm?”

“You...” He gasped as Shiao added a third finger and found his prostate.

“I...?” Shiao prompted watching the changing expressions on his lover’s face.

“N...never mind...Ahhh!” Guy arched again, thrusting himself further over Shiao’s talented fingers, then moaned when the Onyx removed them. “H... Hey!”

“Tell me what you were going to say.”

“It...It doesn’t matter. Just keep doing what you were doing.”

“I cannot. My curiosity is aroused as much as my body now, so you must tell me.” He watched Guy flush bright red, able to pick up the difference in the Human’s body temperature even in the darkness surrounding them. “I will give you something better than fingers if you tell me.”

“I...I just wondered if...if you’ve ever...um...been...” Guy didn’t know why he was finding this so difficult to say. In Ceres talking about sex or

offering sexual favors was second nature. “Sucked,” he whispered as his eyes lowered to Shiao’s enormous organ.

Truthfully, he didn’t even know if he would be able to get that thing in his mouth, certainly not all of it, but since Shiao was an Elite, Guy wasn’t even sure if the Onyx would allow such a thing.

“Are you offering to perform fellatio on me, Guy?”

“Fel...what?” Guy shook his head and sat up. “If that means I wanna suck your dick then yes.” There! It was out now, but he didn’t feel any less embarrassed for it and that stuck in his mongrel pride. “If you don’t want to just say so and...”

“You would do this for me?” Shiao asked, oddly touched. He had been programmed that his body was a temple, his skin created to perfection and so others, less inferior species, must not lay eyes or hands upon it. This was why Elites wore gloves and long clothing. Still, he could not deny that he had often thought of just such an activity, when he had been watching Humans engage in pleasure.

“Well, sure. I mean, that’s the kind of thing pai...” Guy paled and suddenly lowered his eyes. He’d almost called Shiao his pairing partner, but they had made no such commitment. Shiao wasn’t Riki, he had to stop thinking that way. Their relationship was anything but normal. “People who...um...have sex do, sometimes. I mean, you make me feel good so I should do the same for you, right?”

“I believe I would enjoy that.” Shiao smiled and slid under the sheet next to Guy, then sat up against the head board. “I am ready.”

Guy snickered at the Onyx’s formality and started to crawl around so he could get in position, but Shiao caught his hips and pulled him back so his legs straddled the Elite’s legs and his back was pressed against Shiao’s chest.

“From here,” Shiao purred as he ran his fingers down Guy’s back then firmly pushed him forward. “I still want to touch you.”

Guy felt himself grow harder, if that were even possible, as he bent forward and reached for the massive organ before him. Luckily, he also had long fingers, and so he could at least wrap his hand around it, barely. Feeling only a moment of trepidation at the intimidating task before him, he started to caress Shiao first, then slowly licked around the base of the Onyx's cock and then up either side of it.

Shiao was startled as a shiver of pleasure shot through him, and was even more inspired by the lovely rounded ass that was presented to him as Guy stretched to reach him. He slid a hand beneath Guy's hips and lifted the mongrel so his mouth was almost level with the young man's hole, then quickly slid his tongue in.

"Hah!" Guy gasped and the unexpected intrusion and glanced back. "Wha...wait!"

"Continue what you are doing," Shiao requested as he went back to his own task.

Guy shivered and wet his lips as the Onyx licked and sucked him and tried to put more effort into what he had promised to do. He spread his lips and managed to get the head of Shiao's cock into his mouth. He proceeded to lick and suck and was encouraged when he felt the Onyx immediately push against his mouth to gain further entry. Guy relaxed his throat as best as he could and took Shiao down another quarter way.

"Guy!" Shiao exclaimed in a surprised voice. It felt amazing, very different than being inside the Human, but he had to remember not to thrust too fervently and hurt Guy. He began to use his mouth as well to elicit gasps and groans of pleasure from Guy, alternating from Guy's hole to pulling the young man's penis backwards and sucking it into his mouth.

Guy was almost overcome by the sensations racking his body, but he continued his task with a relentless energy. Shiao's cock suddenly thrust upwards, almost gagging him and making his eyes water, but he couldn't get it out! It was too much! He could feel pain at the back of his throat as he desperately tried to breathe through his nose, and just when he feared he

might pass out his mouth was freed and he gasped in air even as he coughed.

“Guy!” Shiao exclaimed as he quickly pulled Guy up and back into his arms. “I did not mean to do that. Did I injure you? Let me see.”

Guy let the Onyx’s fingers slide gently in and around his mouth, looking, he supposed, for tears or blockage or maybe even blood. Guy had tasted a little blood at the beginning but then it had been gone. “I’m okay,” he rasped, his throat slightly raw from the massive intrusion it had taken on. “I’m okay.”

“You are not okay!” Shiao gently lay Guy against the mattress, rose and strode out of the room.

“Shit,” Guy wheezed and again started to cough. He hadn’t meant to piss Shiao off.

It had been an accident, that’s all. He should have known better than to make the attempt given what he did when Shiao sucked him off; he couldn’t exactly control his hips either. The idea that he had made the Onyx lose control, despite the moment of fear and pain it had caused him, suddenly excited him.

Shiao returned with a glass of liquid and a moist cloth.

“I’m real o...” Guy began again only to have Shiao pick him up, one handed as if he were a doll, and settle him into a sitting position on the bed against the headboard.

“Drink.”

“I...”

“Drink it.”

Guy took the glass and started to drink, the first swallow burned a little, but after that whatever was in the sweet concoction soothed his aching throat. When he started to hand it back after drinking only a few sips, Shiao glared at him.

“All of it.”

“What’s the big fucking deal,” Guy murmured, lowered his eyes and finished off the glass. He glared mutinously at Shiao as he handed it back, but had to admit his throat felt better. Next Shiao placed the warm cloth around his throat. “What’s this for?”

“To relax your throat muscles.”

“They *were* relaxed until you shoved your...” Guy watched, horrified as Shiao quickly lowered his eyes, and then his head and pressed it against his shoulder. “Hey. Hey, I’m kidding. What’s wrong?”

“I hurt you. Just as I hurt her. We can no longer do this.”

Wait, was Shiao really comparing this minor incident with his ravaging and killing that woman in an uncontrolled haze? “Come on!” Guy slapped at Shiao’s chest and pushed him back. “That was nothing like...”

Shiao rose and reached for the robe he had worn into Guy’s room earlier. “I will not bother you again, Guy.”

Guy was off the bed and jumping onto the Elite’s back before the Onyx could take another step. “You fucking move and I’ll twist your God damned head off!”

Shiao paused, startled at how fast the mongrel had gotten his arms around his neck in a severe vice grip. “I do not understand.”

“You’re gonna leave just like that?” Guy growled. He had let Riki walk away, no way was he going to let Shiao do it too, and as he realized just exactly what lengths he was willing to do to keep Shiao with him. “Just toss me over after everything we’ve done?”

“I have not...”

Guy suddenly released him, slid down and wrapped his arms around Shiao’s waist instead. “Stay with me.”

“I hurt you!”

“So what?” Guy moved around to Shiao’s front. “It was an accident! Just a fucking accident. I’m not bleeding, or dead, or dying. Why are you making such...”

“I can’t hurt you,” Shiao whispered suddenly and crushed Guy in his embrace. He had realized in that moment, when he had heard Guy in distress how much the mongrel truly meant to him. He would rather face torture or termination by Jupiter a million times than hurt Guy for even a single, solitary moment. “I do not wish to hurt you, Guy. You are...”

Guy’s stroked Shiao’s back. “I’m what?” he asked quietly, and wondered if the Onyx could hear how hard his heart was beating.

“Precious. You are precious to me, Guy.”

Oh geez. What did he say to that? Guy realized that there really was nothing he could say. “I...I’m really okay. I didn’t want to stop, I just...I just needed to breathe and...”

Shiao pulled back suddenly and the expression on his face was one of desperation. “You stopped breathing?”

Guy almost laughed. “No.” Well, not exactly. “It was just, harder to breathe...” He shook his head and waved a hand. “I’m okay. It was an accident and I should have anticipated it because God knows how I’ve done that to you when you’re performing...what did you call it?”

“Fellatio.”

“Yeah, that, when you’re doing that to me.”

“It is only...”

“Only?” Guy prompted, charmed by how adorably shy Shiao could be sometimes, considering he was an Elite and they were known for their stellar communication skills.

“It felt so wonderful. I was unable to stop myself, and that is what worries me, Guy. That is why we cannot continue...”

“Fuck that, we will continue. It was your first time getting blown, so you had a reaction. Now we know and we can do something to prevent it next time.”

“We can? What do you suggest?”

“I’ll just cut your dick in half.”

“Will that work?”

Guy laughed at Shiao’s very serious question. “No! How can you so casually accept that suggestion?”

“I will do it if it will make our interactions easier for you.”

“Oh God.” Guy pulled Shiao back to the bed and climbed in. “I like your dick exactly as it is,” he stated tossing the sheet away as he lay back on the bed and slowly spread his legs. “Now come here and put it where it needs to be.”

“Do you only wish half...”

“All of it!” Guy barked and then laughed again as Shiao moved to comply. “You’re such a dork.”

“What is a dork?” Shiao asked as he grabbed a tube of lubrication and generously applied it to his organ, which had softened during the encounter but responded immediately with Guy’s invitation.

“You are,” Guy answered and slid his arms around Shiao’s neck. “Now com’ere.”

“As you wish.” Shiao climbed onto the bed and slid home.

Chapter 29

Summary for the Chapter:

Raoul reacts to Katze's secret

Raoul stared at the naked, unspoiled male before him and grew aroused, he was shocked by the swiftness of his own reaction. Usually the pleasure he derived from his pets was of a mental stimulation, not a physical one. Not that he had never had a physical reaction, it had just been a very long time and one didn't ever speak of such things as it was considered a sign of weakness. Elites had organic brains that assisted in physical sensations, but they allowing themselves to be led by a physical reaction was left to the Barbaric Humans, not for Elites and certainly not for Blondies. Unless, of course, you were Iason Mink.

"How...." He tried again, annoyed at his loss of words a second time. "How is this possible? You are Furniture! You had to undergo the procedure to..."

"My first Master was an Emerald named Jaren Nu, he bribed the physician not to castrate me. He was aware of what happened with my father, and while I practically begged them to take it all away, so I would never have to suffer that sort of thing again, he decided I was too traumatized to make that decision."

Raoul struggled to process what he was seeing. Most Furniture came from Guardian where life is difficult offered and almost an endless supply of willing children to mold. They matured quickly and looked for any reason to escape. While there was a general understanding that children at such a young age usually did not have a true understanding of what being castrated meant, which was why they were processed so young, he had to admit it had never occurred to him what sort of real effect the process would have on an adolescent.

"The children from Guardian are usually processed for Furniture at the age of six," Raoul began.

“I wasn’t from Ceres and I wasn’t an orphan,” Katze reminded. “I was found at the hospital by Jaren Nu when I was ten, after I’d killed my father, and while I was more than willing to have the procedure done, Master Jaren thought it would be more traumatic for me to be castrated since I had already experienced sex and was so close to puberty.”

“Why not simply make you a pet? At that age, you would have been ripe...”

“I couldn’t deal with anyone touching me, Raoul. I *killed* my father. Something snapped inside of me and the only person I would even let near me for a very long time was Master Jaren. He wanted me to be Furniture, because he felt all the knowledge we are infused with, the discipline and social skills would be good for me and give me purpose.

“I see.” Raoul watched Katze’s fingers moved to his wrist unit again to reengage the hologram and Raoul immediately caught his hands. “No, not yet.”

Katze held Raoul’s gaze. “Don’t even think about it...” He began and then found himself shoved back onto the bed. “You can’t!”

“Why can’t I?” Raoul demanded, suddenly infused with so much desire he almost did not know what to do with it; *almost*. “You did give permission for me to experiment later.” He caught the fist that came towards him, amused and once again pinned Katze’s wrists to the bed with one hand. “You invited me here to show me something I had never seen before, now you will let me investigate thoroughly.”

“I was drunk,” Katze stated, grimly, and lonely and hurt, he added silently; but now he was paying for it. “It wasn’t permission to molest me.”

“Molest?” Raoul’s gaze roamed down over Katze’s body, then his gloved hand followed the same path his eyes took. It felt odd, to be stimulated by touching a fully-grown man instead of a young boy. Where a pet would normally be soft, supple, and if brand new, the young body would react with delicious trembling, the body beneath him was as still as stone.

Katze neither shivered or trembled in fear or passion. His body was not soft and pliable but hard and firm. there was no reaction to Raoul’s touch in the

man beneath him, not even a flicker of arousal. “What are you feeling?”

“Nauseated.”

“Do you suffer from impotence?”

Suffer, Katze thought, no it wasn't an ailment it was a blessing that he couldn't get aroused after what his father had done. When Raoul's hand started to fondle him, he shifted in discomfort but otherwise did not move. It had been decades since anyone had touched him there, but still he felt nothing except fear and anxiety from it. He'd made his bed now he would have to lie in it, besides not all the effects of the alcohol had worn off and now that he was laying down again he could feel himself starting to float a little in that alcoholic haze.

“Answer me?”

“I don't feel anything, that's your answer.” Katze turned his head back and stared up at the Blondie above him, wondering why Jupiter had made Her creations so beautiful. Iason was beyond beautiful, Iason was perfection and if it was Iason touching him, maybe he would be feeling something. That terrifying thought shattered his calm and he started to struggle again, suddenly and violently.

Raoul was startled by the amount of strength in Katze's sudden attack and had to use almost half of his own body to subdue him. “Stop this! I will not hurt you, boy.”

Something switched on inside of Katze as a memory was suddenly triggered. He relaxed again as he met Raoul's gaze. “Do you want to fuck me, daddy?” he said in a voice much younger than his own.

Raoul's eyes widened, then narrowed as he moved his face closer in concern. “Katze?”

“I'll be good,” Katze said, spread his legs obediently and lifted his head off the mattress to press his lips to the person above him. He opened his mouth

as his father had trained to do, slipped his tongue in as he was told men enjoyed and as the kiss continued, a single tear slid from his left eye.

Raoul had never experienced a kiss like this. He occasionally gave brief little kisses to his pets, but they were nothing like this. This was a kiss like the ones pets used at pet parties before mating. This was a kiss filled with the passion of a hot, moist tongue and the slight touch of teeth. Raoul found himself drowning in it, devouring it, wanting, needing more, and that truth shocked him back to reality.

He wrenched his mouth away and broke the kiss. "Katze."

"I'll be good. You can do whatever you want. I'll be good."

Raoul watched another tear slide down Katze's cheek and wondered if somehow the young man had regressed into his past. He slid to the side and lay on the bed to pull Katze against him. "No, you don't have to. We'll stop here."

"I'll be good," Katze continued and did not resist the arms around him as they lay there, together on the bed.

"Yes, you are a good..." Thinking back to the conversation before the change, he decided that it might have been one of the words he said that triggered Katze's episode, so he rephrased. "Man. You are a good man."

It took several minutes for Katze to come back to himself and when he did, he cursed at the compromising position he found himself in, especially as he didn't recall how he got into it. His black outs were getting more frequent and that worried him.

He pushed against Raoul which was tantamount to pushing against a brick wall. "Let me go."

"Tell me why you called me here."

"I told you. I showed you what I promised!"

"Yes, but you have not told me why you promised such a thing."

Raoul pulled back just enough that he could look down at Katze, but not enough to release the man caught in his arms. He had held a pet on his lap multiple times, accepted a light kiss or hug from them. He had embraced Iason and Issac on occasion, in a platonic greeting, but he had never fully held someone in his arms before. He found that he enjoyed the sensation immensely, and that fact also greatly concerned him, though not enough to let Katze go.

“Tell me why you challenged me to come here, when you have spent weeks avoiding me?”

Again, Katze struggled to get free, but it was a halfhearted attempt. “I have to take care of a call of nature.”

“Hold it.”

“If I piss on you...” Katze winced as Raoul’s hand closed around his cock in a tight, secure grip, effectively preventing anything from coming out.

“Answer me.”

“Take your hands off my dick,” Katze growled. “And let me put my clothes on, or I you’ll find out just what kind of challenge I can be.”

Raoul released him, not because he was the least intimidated, but because *this* was the Katze he was used to and it was a relief to have him back. He watched Katze scramble up, press his wrist unit to resume the hologram and then quickly grab at his clothes.

“I’m hungry,” the Blondie decided. “Cook me a meal.” He rose and walked out of the room, suddenly needing to put some distance between them so he could analyze his own behavior towards the black-market dealer.

Katze stared after him, cursing as he threw his clothes back on. Glancing back at his empty scotch bottle, he briefly wondered if they had delivery this far out?

Raoul watched, impressed as Katze moved fluidly through the small kitchen area, chopping, dicing, sautéing and grilling. Most Furniture were required to cook well, his own, Peter, was an excellent cook and could recreate any dish from a recipe, but every now and then there was a Furniture who had a true gift for food. While Peter's meals were nutritious and delicious, Iason's Furniture Cal's were so much more flavorful and unique. He had a feeling that Katze was also one of these kinds of chefs, based on the extraordinary smells the man was creating with just the most basic of ingredients.

"Do you like to cook?" he inquired as he crossed one leg over the other and sipped a cup of coffee; Katze had purchased no wine and had already consumed the alcoholic beverages, so there was nothing else to offer the Blondie to drink, other than water and cooking sherry.

Katze shrugged and set a fillet of fresh fish into the steaming frying pan that was already spitting with herbed butters, onions, mushrooms and an assortment of seasonings. It had been awhile since he had done this, since he'd had time to do this. He had purchased a wide selection of food with the intent of cooking for himself every day that he was on vacation, but once he got here, he no longer felt the urge to. Now that he was in the kitchen with his hands on the food, it was having a calming effect on him. Sometimes, he missed being Furniture and having someone to cook for and take care of. Someone who would come home at night and be there in the morning, even if it was a Master.

"Did you know how to cook before Jaren Nu found you?"

Katze carefully set the second piece of fish next to the first. "No."

Cook, Katze though wryly, he rarely was given food to eat when he lived with his father. He lowered the heat, placed raw cucumber and lemon slices over and around the fish then set a cover over the pan. Turning back to the kitchen island he tossed some cream, a handful of shredded cheese, some oregano and lemon pepper into a pot, whisked it together, then set it on the stove top to simmer.

"Have you been impotent since your time with your father?"

Katze's moment of calm was swiftly deteriorating. Why the hell were they even talking about this? "It started just after."

"And you haven't felt any sexual desire since then?"

If Katze was truly honest he hadn't felt any sexual desire even when he had been raped by his father and those other men, but his young body had been trained to respond to the constant stimulation. "No."

"Then, you've never experienced true, physical pleasure?"

Katze slammed down the dish of Ricta Root that he had been about to place in the cream sauce. "No, Raoul. I don't feel any desire at all and I don't want to feel it. The idea of it turns my stomach. I hate it when people touch me, I hate it when I have to attend pet parties and watch other people touching each other and most of all, I hate talking about this!"

"Something triggered your challenge to me." Raoul set his cup down and rose so he could stand next to Katze; he watched the man stiffen warily. "You are not a drinking man, or so I have been told. You don't engage in exotics or stimulants, other than your cigarettes. You do not have a desire for sex, even though you are perfectly capable, and you don't gamble. You have no valuable vices which can be exploited, and thus you remain firmly in control at all times. You would make an excellent Elite."

Katze was oddly flattered by the comparison. "Do you just like the sound of your voice?"

Raoul smiled. "I do, yes. I have a lovely voice, not too high, not too low, and it has a near lyrical quality to it, don't you think?"

Katze stared at the Blondie, trying to ascertain if Raoul was kidding or if he was really that narcissistic.

"You don't agree?" Raoul prompted.

"It's fine, I guess."

Katze added the roots to the cream sauce then lifted the cover off the frying pan, releasing a sensational burst of delicious scent. The juice of the cucumbers and lemons had mixed with the fish and other flavors in the pan, as he had intended. He carefully moved the pieces of fish and cucumbers into a deep dish, tossing the lemons, then poured the remaining mixture over it and set it in the oven. Rattled, because he didn't know what Raoul would say or do next, he set the frying pan back on the stove harder than he had intended and some of the remaining oil sparked out onto his hand.

"Ow! Shit!" He started to move to the sink to run water over it, but suddenly found his burned finger surrounded by a Blondie's lips. "What are you doing?" he demanded, appalled.

"Tending to your injury of course," Raoul returned calmly, catching Katze's hand when he would have yanked it back. "I understand that this is an acceptable response, according to Human standards."

"You're not Human!"

"No." He couldn't help himself, Raoul realized, he had been honest with Katze and did truly want to be his friend, but his need to torment the red-head was suddenly so much greater.

He lowered the temperature in his mouth to offer a cooling effect as he continued to suck on Katze's finger, then used his tongue to lick it from stem to tip, he watched Katze jerk. "Does it feel better?"

"It...it feels fine." Katze tried using his other hand to free the one Raoul had captured but again it was useless. He reached for the chef's knife with his free hand but Raoul was slapped a gloved hand over it, trapping Katze's hand and knife against the kitchen island. "Can...can you stop?"

Raoul could detect an increase in Katze's blood pressure, his heart rate had accelerated. "You seem to be enjoying this..."

"I'm not!" Though the burning sensation in his finger had decreased, Katze lowered his eyes. "Please, let go."

Raoul released him and he watched Katze put several feet between them. “What are you so afraid of?”

“I’m not afraid of you.”

“You appear to be. Is it because I now know your secret?”

“I...I showed you that because...” There had been no real reason, Katze realized. He’d foolishly made a challenge to a Blondie and then had no choice but to complete it. “I won’t be one of your lab rats.”

Raoul stepped closer, watched Katze step back, into the living area. “What has upset you, Katze? Tell me and I will stop distracting myself with other matters.”

“I told you, I’m not...”

“Then why were you drunk? Why do everything in your power to hide from me and then call me here?”

“Because there was no one else!” Katze backed up another step, horrified at his outburst, even though it was the truth.

Fuck it, he’d already screwed himself beyond reason anyway. He probably wouldn’t be able to go back to work for Iason because he had compromised himself to Raoul. He’d allowed someone to learn his secret, his one weakness, which meant he was now a liability to Iason.

“What do you mean by that?” Raoul demanded crossing the room and grabbing Katze by the arms before he could scamper away. “Tell me what you mean by that?”

“There really is no one else.” Katze sighed and closed his eyes as he envisioned his own demise.

Would Iason hire someone to terminate him, once Raoul told him the truth, or would he just order Katze to take his own life? Which would be better, death by another or by his own hand? He wondered when he had become so morose.?

“Iason only cares about Riki. Riki only cares about Iason and Cal...Cal only cares about being a good Furniture. None of my contacts even know my real name and none of my employees have any clue who or what I really am.”

Raoul’s hard gaze softened. “Who and what are you, Katze?”

Katze opened his eyes and, for the first time ever in his miserable life, the wretchedness he felt daily was visibly apparent. “No body. I’m nobody. I’m not a raped son of bastard. I’m not a Furniture to a Blondie. I’m not a black-market dealer, or a front man, or a land owner or a sales conglomerate...All those things are just part of my past or facade, none of it is real anymore. I’m nobody. Thanks to you I don’t have a past and now thanks to Riki and my own stupidity, I don’t have a future either.”

“Riki? What does that mongrel have to do with this?”

“He came to me, did you know? He came to tell me about his change in status. He thought I could help him understand what it meant, how he should act or what he should do. Me!” Katze shoved at Raoul’s chest and the Blondie released him. He returned to the stove and turned off the sauce before it boiled over.

“Why did Riki come to see you?” Raoul asked curious.

“Exactly! Why did he come to me with his fantastic news? What the hell do I know about being free, or being in love, or having anyone give one flying fuck about *me*?” Katze’s ended the sentence by tossing the cream sauce across the room so it bounced off the wall and splattered all over the floor. Both of them stared at the mess in stunned silence, then Katze moved forward and crouched to pick up the pot, but all he could do was stare at it.

Raoul checked the kitchen console for a cleaning droid, found it and quickly activated it. Katze didn’t move, even when the droid started to suck up the cream sauce and vegetables.

“Are you in love with him?”

It took Katze a moment for Raoul's question to register with him, by then the floor was spotless, and the pot had been plucked from his hand by the droid; who hurried back to its cubbyhole. "What?" He rose slowly, turned to the Blondie. "What did you say?"

"Are you in love with him?"

"With Riki?" Katze scoffed.

"With Iason."

The words were like a kick to the gut and for a moment, Katze felt just the slightest bit faint, but he quickly recovered. "No," he returned as if not quite sure of his answer. "I...How could I be?"

"You wouldn't be the first," Raoul admitted. "He is intensely charismatic and magnetically beautiful. Of all the Blondies, he is the only one whose consideration or favor can be seen as a blessing or a curse." He stepped closer, placed a hand on Katze's shoulder. "There is no shame in it."

Katze shrugged off the gloved hand, angrily. "I'm *not* in love with Iason."

"With Riki, then?"

"Fuck no!" Katze growled and moved back to the stove. He checked the fish in the oven, then turned back to the kitchen island and started to prepare a salad to go with it, as he had ruined the other side dish. "I barely even *like* Riki."

"Really?" Raoul's eyebrows rose and he settled on one of the stools on the other side of the island. He selected one of the vegetables that Katze had peeled earlier and started dicing it into smaller pieces. "I had the impression you two were quite close."

"Where would you get that idea?" Katze demanded, almost impressed that Raoul knew how to cut a vegetable properly.

"You always seem to be running around saving him from catastrophe and the like."

Always on Iason's order, Katze thought bitterly, as he shredded a head of lettuce and tossed it in a bowl. "It's my job to look after him."

"Is it?"

"Yes."

"According to whom?"

"Iason." Katze sliced up some more cucumber and added it to the salad. "He's given me specific orders that I have to protect Riki whenever the situation calls for it." Even if Iason's own life were in danger and that was something that Katze had strongly protested against.

"Interesting." Raoul dropped his vegetables into the bowl and reached for the block of cheese Katze had used for the earlier sauce. He halved it then dropped it in a small machine that shredded it instantly over the accompanying dish. "Does Riki know you've been designated his body guard?"

Katze offered him a dry look. "What do you think?"

"Is that why you don't like him, because Iason ordered you to protect him?"

"I don't really dislike him," Katze admitted. "I mean he's a fighter, and proud, he's a survivor and the kid's been through a lot."

"But?"

"But, he's also foolish and reckless and never considers what his actions mean for Iason."

"And that frustrates you?"

"Damn right it does!" Katze growled, tossing the knife down, angrily. He had never spoken openly about his feelings regarding Riki and Iason's relationship, and he wasn't sure why he was doing so now. "Iason gave me a direct order that if he and Riki are both in danger, I was to save Riki and

leave him. Leave Iason! How can he ask me to do that? How can he expect me to just walk away?"

And yet he had, Katze remembered dejectedly. At Dana Bahn, he had been intending to get Riki away from there, as he had been ordered to do, even though he knew that Iason was trapped inside. It had been a direct order from his Master and he could not, would not disobey it regardless of his feelings. Luckily, Riki had taken that horrific choice away from him and had gone back into the fire; but that only seemed to make matters worse, because not only had he failed to do as his Master bid by rescuing Riki, but Katze had lost Iason and Riki, or so he thought.

"Would you rather Iason had never brought Riki to Tanagura as a pet?"

Katze paused over the vinaigrette dressing he was creating. No, he wouldn't go so far as to say that because he could see how much happier Iason was with Riki around, but he could also admit that things were better when Iason just had pets that he played with, instead of ones that fought and create havoc and threw them into life threatening situations.

Was he in love with Iason? No, at least he felt no sexual attraction to the Blondie. He didn't want to be treated as a pet, he didn't want to take Riki's place in Iason's heart, he just wanted...What did he want?

"Katze?"

Katze lifted his gaze to the Blondie across from him.

"Why did Riki's change in designation hurt you?"

Katze sucked his breath in and looked down again. Hurt him? Had he been hurt by it? Maybe, but why? What could be the cause? He had already earned a respected place in Iason's life, perhaps not at his side but near it. And while he couldn't admit that he belonged to Iason anymore, Iason trusted him to do things he would never ask of anyone else, so that alone should make him proud and happy, and yet...and yet hearing that Riki was now Iason's mate or consort greatly disturbed him.

“I don’t know,” he finally admitted. “I’m not jealous of Riki or anything and I don’t want to live with Iason or be his pet, but...”

“But?”

Katze shrugged and moved to turn off the oven. “I honestly don’t know. It just made me really angry and really, really sad at the same time.” It was rare for him to experience extremes of any emotion, he had trained himself too well to ignore such things. “I guess, maybe I worry that Iason won’t need me anymore. I mean he obviously trusts Riki now and people will start accepting him more, maybe.”

Raoul watched Katze plate up their dinner, carry it to the small kitchen table and he moved to settle in one of the seats. “I’m sure that Iason will still need you, Katze. You were his man well before Riki came along and he has told me multiple times that you are indispensable to him.”

Katze poured a second cup of coffee and refilled Raoul’s, then returned with them to the table, and settled opposite Raoul. “Not so much that he didn’t even blink at lending me out to you.”

Raoul, who had just cut into his fish blinked in surprise and stared at Katze. “Is that what’s bothering you, that he accepted my request for you?”

“He never would have done something like that before, he never would have considered it!”

“How do you know?”

“Because I know others have asked him and he always refused.”

“I thought only a select few knew you still worked for Iason?”

Katze nodded and watched Raoul slide a piece of fish into his mouth. “When I was Furniture they asked, which is acceptable, lots of people lend out their Furniture, but Iason always refused to lend me to anyone.”

Raoul had to admit, this was the best fish he had ever tasted. “Well, if Iason really does throw you away come work for me as my cook.” He smiled.

“This is truly amazing, Katze.” He saw that his attempt at humor fell flat when Katze simply stared down at his untouched plate. “Iason needs you, he’ll never abandon you.” Raoul recalled the conversation he’d had with Iason over his borrowing Katze. Iason had made it clear that he would never allow Katze to leave, but if the red-head did somehow become a burden to Iason, would the Blondie just terminate him? Raoul found he didn’t like that idea one bit.

Katze continued to stare down at his food. “How long?”

Raoul tilted his head. “How long for what?”

“Was I out.” Katze shifted uncomfortably in his chair then finally gathered the courage to meet Raoul’s curious gaze. “Earlier I blacked out. How long was I out?”

Raoul tried to recall if Katze had passed out while they had been in the bedroom but the young man had been conscious...He blinked as he recalled Katze’s reaction to being called a boy. He slowly lowered his fork. “You don’t remember?”

Katze shook his head. “No. Did I do anything weird or say anything that was...odd?”

Raoul struggled for only a moment of whether to tell Katze the truth or not. “You called me Daddy and asked me if I wanted to fuck you, then you kissed me.”

“Fucking hell!” Katze curled into himself, pushed his plate aside and dropped his head on the table to hide it behind his arms.

“It was an extraordinarily good kiss,” Raoul offered, but again his attempt to lift the mood failed as Katze groaned dejectedly. “Does it happen often? These episodes?”

Katze shook his head from side to side but didn’t lift it, as in a muffled voice he said. “Just a few times, just this year.”

“And you remember nothing of what triggers it or what you say or do?”

“Nothing.” Katze lifted his head, his face almost as pale as the white counter top behind them. “I’m going back to it, aren’t I? I turning back into what my father made me, becoming that kid again.”

“It is impossible to actually go back to what we have been, Katze, although obviously something keeps triggering you to regress.” Raoul rose, walked to the refrigeration unit and ordered a tall glass of cold water, he brought it to the table and Katze drank it as if he was a man dying of thirst. “You been under considerable stress lately.” Especially considering all the near misses on Iason’s life the last two years, he could see now how that would upset Katze.

“I want it to stop. It has to stop.” Katze reached across and caught Raoul’s gloved hand. “Can you make it stop?”

Raoul found he was touched by the request, especially from a man who never asked for help. “I am knowledgeable in human physiology, but I am not equipped to handle this type of problem. However, I can know of someone who can help. He assisted Riki when he was trying to…”

“No!” Katze stood up suddenly and moved to the sink, he started filling it with water and piling in dishes instead of placing them in the automated cleaner. “Forget it. I’m sure it will pass.”

Realizing how difficult it must be for Katze to have trusted him enough to even ask for help, Raoul rose and went to stand beside him. “I will do what I can,” he offered and placed his hand on Katze’s shoulder. “But you will have to tell me everything. There can be no secrets of your past if I am to help you.”

Katze released a stuttered laugh. “What secrets? You know everything about me now.” And that truth was extremely alarming. He sank his hands into the soapy water submerging up over his wrist unit which he never removed. It was water proof, shatter proof and protected against electronic pulses and tampering. It was his one safety net. “I don’t guess any of it matters now, does it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Once Iason finds out about me, he’ll probably give me to you to terminate, so you can experiment to your hearts content before then.”

“I have already said that Iason will not...”

Katze met Raoul’s gaze. “That will change when he realizes I’m not a eunuch!”

“And how will he learn such a thing?”

Katze scowled. “I don’t expect you to keep it from him, Raoul. Not from Iason...”

Raoul caught Katze’s face between his gloved hands, then just as suddenly released him. After a moment of clear hesitation, Raoul did something he had never done before. He removed his glove allowed himself to make skin to skin contact with another as he placed his hand to Katze’s cheek. Soft, he thought, smooth, not that of an adolescent but of a man.

“I will not mention this to Iason or anyone, I have given my word.”

Katze’s eyes had widened in shock at the contact, and he was surprised to feel the cool sensation of Raoul’s actual flesh. “Yes, but...it’s Iason...”

“And *we* are friends.” Raoul caressed Katze’s cheek before he realized he was going to do it. “You and I are friends and I will not betray your secrets any more than I would betray Iason’s, who is both my brother and my friend.”

“Do...do you really mean that?” Katze gasped and his heart leap inside his chest.

“Yes. I have spent far too much time getting you to agree to toss it away on a whim.” A moment of devilment sparked inside Raoul at the hopeful, yet wary look the young Human gave him. “Shall we seal it with a kiss?”

Before Katze to protest Raoul's lips were on his. He allowed the Blondie to do as he liked, since they were making a deal. It wasn't bad, actually. Nothing like the sloppy, rancid kisses he'd been subjected to as a child. This was soft, non-intrusive and not nearly as wet, as Elites did not produce saliva.

"Did you feel anything?" Raoul whispered when he finally ended the kiss.

Katze almost smirked, so that was his game? He turned his head and lifted his lips to the Blondie's ear, as if he were going to whisper a response; then he bit him.

Instead of being outraged, Raoul stepped back and laughed.

Chapter 30

Summary for the Chapter:

Iason takes Riki dancing and Shiao asks a favour.

Riki stared into his drink and tried to ignore the stares of the other Elites in the club. Unlike the last time they had been to a club, he neither had to sit on Iason's lap or on the floor. Instead they sat side by side in a deep, rounded booth that sported a high back to blocked at least some of the spectators from view. There were a few pets here with their owners, seated as he used to be; some looked at him with resentment and envy, others with what could be admiration.

Most of the clubs in Tanagura and Midas catered to Elites, but the ones in Eos were exclusively for them. Whatever they wanted to happen did, Riki had been the victim of such a mentality when Iason had molested him in front of everyone in this very same booth. The humiliation had been extreme, but he could do nothing but accept it and even when he growled and struggled Iason accepted it as a challenge and did even worse. When that didn't work, he'd used the damn pet ring to force him to behave.

Now, he sat beside Iason, the Blondie who had once claimed him as a pet and who had now promised to be a committed mate to him. He had accepted Iason's ring, relieved that it had been for his finger instead of his cock, and he was working to accept the change of status that Jupiter had bestowed on him. Perhaps she had been trying to be kind, but it actually seemed to be causing more trouble than before for him and Iason. Still, they had both been through worse, so he supposed they would get through this as well.

"Well, well, if it isn't the love-birds."

Riki barely stifled a groan as Raoul slid into the booth next to Iason and he waved at AnJell to settle on the floor by Riki's side. Riki felt a moment of

resentment on the kid's behalf, but saw that the Unicyn had put on weight and his colour was much better than it had been the last time he'd seen him.

"Why are you over here?" he demanded.

"He asked if he could sit next to you before we approached," Raoul said as he slid an arm across the back of the booth and lifted his finger for the server. "I'm in a generous mood, though I will have to train him to have better taste."

"I thought you were out of town?" Iason inquired.

"I was."

"Business?"

"Visiting a friend," Raoul returned and almost smiled as he thought of Katze, who was still in the cottage he had rented off planet, no doubt trying to enjoy what was left of his vacation. He glanced at Iason's frothy golden drink, which mirrored the one Riki had in front of him. "What *is* that you're drinking?"

"I'm not sure," Iason admitted. "Riki told them how to make it." He looked at Riki who he could tell was uncomfortable with the adorably shy way that AnJell was staring up at him. "What did you call it?"

"A Mudslide," Riki replied.

"Sounds disgusting."

"You wouldn't like it, anyway. It has real, unfiltered alcohol in it, not that dainty, watered down shit you lot drink."

Raoul's eyes flashed. "That sounds like a challenge?"

Riki shrugged and took a sip of his drink.

"I accept." Raoul looked at the server. "Bring me that mongrel's concoction and..." He looked down at AnJell. "What would you like, pet?"

“Whatever you wish to give me, Master.”

Riki gritted his teeth but was surprised as Raoul ordered a fruit cocktail, he watched a moment of pure joy explode over the face of the kid on the floor beside him.

Raoul glanced at Riki, as if sensing his distaste. “Unicyn’s are Vegans, and my pet really loves his fruit, don’t you?”

AnJell nodded eagerly. “Oh yes, Master. Very much!”

“Riki here is under the impression that I mistreat you, why don’t you tell him how horrid a Master I have been?”

“Oh no!” AnJell shook his head. “Master Raoul has been so very kind to me! He removed me from my former Master who was...” AnJell lowered his head, ashamed to speak unkindly of anyone. “Different than Master Raoul. Master Raoul lets me have all the vegetables and pasta and fruit I like and I have my very own room and a soft bed and I can watch screen if I like or go shopping. And he buys me the prettiest clothes and...”

“Makes you masturbate or fuck in front of him?” Riki inserted, brutally, trying to knock the kid back to his senses.

“Riki,” Iason warned quietly as the server returned with their orders.

AnJell blinked several times, looking from Riki to his Master to the floor and then back up to Raoul, who spoke up on his pet’s behalf.

“Don’t speak to him like that.”

“Why, he’s just a pet, isn’t he?” Why were none of them understanding the point he was trying to get across? He wasn’t trying to hurt AnJell deliberately, he was just trying to show that the way he was being treated should be considered unacceptable.

“He is *my* pet,” Raoul stated, all humour gone from his face now. “Just because I allowed you to take advantage of one of my pets before, do not think for a moment that I will allow such a thing to happen again.”

“I never took advantage! She came on to me!”

“She knew no better!” Raoul snapped. “You did what you did to prove a point and to continue the war you had going with Iason. Mimea was young, foolish and allowed herself to be misguided by your barbaric manners; she paid a heavy price for it.”

“Whose fault was that?” Riki tossed, ignoring the spark of guilt and remorse that lit inside of him.

“Yours! Entirely yours.”

“That’s bullshit! I didn’t fucking sell her off to a brothel!”

Raoul glanced at Iason who had so far stayed out of the conversation. “How can you live with such a selfish, uncouth thing as that?”

“Me selfish!” Riki growled. “You Blondies have reinvented the term!”

“Yes, you, selfish. You only ever think of yourself, Riki. It was your need to punish Iason that led you to have sex with Mimea and resulted in her punishment.”

“You were going to force her to fuck some pet she didn’t want, just so you could sell her kids!”

“The reward I would have received from that pairing was substantial enough that I would not have had to pair her with another pet for several years. Mimea did not mind performing for me, however she had trouble during the pet parties and so I tried to make it easier for her, but instead you selfishly pulled her into your war with Iason and she paid the price.”

Unwilling to be painted as the villain, despite feeling even more remorse at Raoul’s statement, Riki lashed out. “Substantial enough? You Blondies have more money than the entire population of Amoï!”

“Riki,” Iason interceded finally, before things came to blow. “There are exceptions to every rule. For the reproduction rule, a female pet must have one child every two years. The pet Raoul had intended to breed Mimea to

was one of a twin, so there were high hopes that she would have twins and thus allow her to wait four more years before she would be bred again. He was doing what he could for her, as her Master to be considerate of her fear of coupling.”

“Yes,” Raoul insisted. “Not all of us can flout the rules and get away with it so easily.”

“Well, that’s enough of all of that. We’re here to socialize not argue.”

Riki felt his stomach turn queasy at the idea that Raoul was right and he had ruined Mimea’s future. Although she now worked in a casino, he supposed that it was harder work than being a pet and seemed like she was doing okay. Had he really caused that much trouble? He grabbed his drink and took several long swallows.

Raoul sat back and picked up his own drink, studying it from every angle, then sniffing it before he finally took a cringing sip. His eyes widened in surprise and he took another sip. It was creamy and smooth and had just the right amount of bite to get your attention. Fascinating. It was probably one of the best drinks he’d ever tasted.

“What do you think?” Iason asked watching his friend amused.

“It’s not bad, for unrefined mongrel swill.”

Iason placed a hand over Riki’s as it curled into a fist, but spoke to Raoul. “Stop sniping at each other or I’ll send you both to bed without any supper.”

AnJell giggled and then quickly lowered his head as everyone glanced down at him.

“Something amuse you?” Raoul asked, dryly.

“No.”

Raoul crooked his finger and patted his lap, AnJell immediately rose and settled upon it. “How is your fruit?”

“I...haven’t tried it yet.”

“Why not?” Raoul caught the boy’s chin and lifted it until AnJell met his eyes. “Did our barking frighten you?”

AnJell nodded.

“Because I was barking at Riki or because he was barking at me?” When AnJell bit his lower lip, and remained silent Raoul rubbed his back, soothingly. “Answer me, pet.”

“Um...both. I...I like you both and I don’t want either of you to...um...be upset.”

Raoul glanced across the table at Riki. “You’re not upset, are you, Princeling?”

Annoyed by the term, Riki studied AnJell’s expression before he answered, He was shocked by Raoul’s show of tenderness, and oddly uncomfortable with it. He sat back. “Nah, I never actually listen when you’re talking.”

“Exactly.” Raoul nodded and turned back to his pet. “And Riki never makes any sense when he speaks so we’re both completely fine.”

AnJell glanced between them and then curled into Raoul and whispered something in his ear, making Raoul smile.

“Just this once.” He picked up his drink and held it to the Unisyn’s pale lips. “Just a sip, it is very strong.” AnJell took a sip, instantly screwed up his face and started coughing; enough that both Iason and Raoul chuckled and even Riki allowed himself a smirk. “Hideous, isn’t it?”

AnJell wiped his mouth and nodded, even as Riki pushed the plate of fruit that the server had delivered towards them. “This will dull the taste,” he promised and watched the kid eagerly reach for the soft, juicy morsels.

Iason finished off his drink, and then squeezed Riki’s hand. “May I have this dance?”

“Are you kidding me?” Riki scoffed.

“When have you ever known me to tell a joke?”

Actually, while Iason didn't tell jokes, he did like to tease so yes, he did joke on occasion. He glanced around and noticed the looks of both interest and mild distaste from those close enough to hear Iason's offer.

“I think he's scared,” Raoul whispered loudly in AnJell's ear. “I imagine he's a horrible dancer.”

“Fuck you, I'm a great dancer,” Riki retorted before he could help himself and again heard Iason chuckle. Fine, fuck it, he hadn't danced in ages so he rose and accepted Iason's hand as they and walked out to the dance floor.

He glanced back and watched AnJell feed Raoul a piece of fruit, then the Blondie picked through the bowl for a cherry and fed it to his pet. The kid looked happy, he realized, much happier than he had been with whichever Master he'd had before anyway. He was still shy and timid, but that was probably the first time he had seen AnJell actually smile or heard him laugh.

Iason pulled Riki into his arms and started to waltz them expertly around the room, taking his attention away from the pair at their table. “Thank you for accepting.”

“Yeah, well, I just did it to piss people off.”

“I'm aware of that.”

“You're not bad,” Riki tossed, who would have thought an android would have such good rhythm. That thought led him to recall just how good Iason's rhythm was during other activities and he felt himself harden. “Shit.”

“Is that for me?” Iason murmured, pulling Riki closer without missing a step.

“Who the hell else would it be for?” the mongrel grumbled and peered around again self-consciously, only to have Iason catch his chin and focus his eyes back on the Blondie’s face.

“On me,” he demanded and leaned in to kiss Riki lightly on the lips. “Forget them, and look only at me.”

Riki didn’t find that a very difficult order to obey, for Iason was beyond beautiful, even when he was angry. “You’re such a child,” he sighed and, releasing Iason’s hand he wrapped both arms around the elite’s neck and gazed up into eyes that were now his favorite shade of blue. “If I get whiplash from this...”

Iason chuckled and dipped his head so Riki would not have to look up quite as much. “I will be sure to massage it for you.”

“Yeah? That a promise?”

“Absolutely. Of course, you will also need to do something for me.”

“Figures. Like what?”

“Sing for me.”

Riki blinked. “Do what now?”

“Sing.”

“I...” Riki’s words were cut off as Iason placed a finger against his lips.

“I’ve heard you singing, Riki.”

Riki flushed and scoffed. “W...when?” His mind raced backwards to think of when that could have been. He liked music, Iason had caught him dancing once, but singing? Had he been singing, ever around the Blondie?

“Is it a deal?”

“No!”

“Why?”

“I...I don't really sing...”

“You do and you have a lovely voice.”

“Maybe you think so, but...”

“Am I not the only one who matters?”

“You seem to think so.”

Iason chuckled, delighted and twirled Riki around, making the mongrel even more self-conscious.

“Don't do that!”

“I will do as I like.” Iason's eyes returned to Riki's as he lowered his head and whispered. “When I like, to whom I like as often as I like.”

Riki swallowed as his dick hardened even more. “Fucker.”

“I certainly will be later.” Iason gave a hint that he was about to twirl Riki out from his body but the Mongrel's grip tightened.

“Don't.”

“Riki.”

“I don't like it. I will dance with you like this, but don't do that fancy shit, I...I'm not good at it.”

Rather than challenge the claim Riki made to Raoul, and because Riki so rarely admitted to any weakness, Iason complied and did not embarrass him further.

“I love you,” the Blondie said softly and gently nipped Riki's ear. “My sweet Prince-Consort.”

Riki flushed, whether it was from embarrassment or pleasure he could not say.

Iason pulled Riki closer as they continued to dance to the music. Jupiter had told him that she had offered Riki his freedom and the chance to return to his own people and Riki had declined because it had meant leaving Iason. Riki didn't know that Iason knew about his choice, and Iason would never admit it either, because that way Riki could maintain his pride and hold onto the pretense that they were both now in this relationship by choice.

The music changed to a new song and Riki pulled back. "Can we go now?"

"Are you not enjoying yourself?"

"Not really." He wanted to go home and have Iason take him to bed, but he couldn't admit that aloud. "We can have more fun at home."

Iason smiled. "I see. Very well, we shall go." They returned to their table long enough to say goodbye and then headed out to Iason's car.

"What is wrong with you?" Guy demanded as he slammed his hand on the table where he and Shiao were eating breakfast.

"I am functioning normally," Shiao returned.

"Bullshit, you're walking around this morning in a daze, and you haven't even touched your food. Tell me what's wrong?"

Shiao looked down at his untouched plate. "I am not hungry." He rose suddenly. "I am going to work."

“I thought you were off today?”

“Yes, well, I have some things to do.”

Guy followed Shiao towards the front entrance and caught the Onyx by the arm. “Something is up with you, please tell me. Maybe I can help...”

Shiao stared at him with a mixture of emotions. “I wish you could, Guy.”

“So there is something!”

“It is not something you can help me with. Please do not ask again.” Shiao dropped a kiss on Guy’s head. “I will see you this evening.”

“But...” Guy began but Shiao was already closing the door behind him.

Shiao moved to his vehicle and slid behind the wheel. The moment he was away from their residence he placed a call. It was answered on the forth ring.

“Do you know what time it is?” the caller grouched angrily.

“It is morning time.”

“Shiao?” A large, domed grey face appeared on the screen and a pair of enormous black eyes blinked owlshly. “Why are you calling me?”

“I require a favour from you, Kl’yi’cuyk.”

“What do I look like a credit cen...” The small alien paused as he moved closer to the screen. “Oh. Is it *that* favour?”

“Yes.”

“Shit.”

“You have spent too much time with Humans, Kl’yi’cuyk. You are beginning to sound like them.”

“What the hell do you expect? We’ve been visiting them for almost two centuries. They’re very stupid creatures, but they have some fascinating culture.”

“Did they not kidnap and kill your uncle?”

“Nah, that was my first mother’s sister’s sixth cousin on my third father’s side, Pl’ey’cici’ak. He was supposed to be there for observation only, but the moron spotted an animal and got hungry. He dove too close and crashed in one of their deserts. He was goo by the time they found him, so I don’t hold a grudge that they played with what was left.”

“I see.”

“So, about this favour, I thought you were good. Didn’t it say it was gonna leave you alone now?”

“It appears that is not the case. I have been summoned back.”

When the man had appeared at his office with the summons Shiao had frozen in fear, for about 3.5 seconds, then resumed his normal parameters. Jupiter should not have known where to find him. She had been able to touch his mind while he was on Amoï so that he could help Iason, but he had deliberately kept all thoughts of his new home and life closed. And yet, She had found him, and that was a great cause for concern.

“And you don’t want to go?”

“I do not.”

“Maybe he’s in danger again...?”

“No. I would know if the issue was Iason.”

“What then? Why would it call you back?”

Shiao shook his head, unable to shake this horrible sense of dread. “I do not know. “ He only knew that to go back to Jupiter would be a mistake. He

could feel it, as Guy sometimes said, in his bones that something was wrong, very, very wrong. “I will be there in less than hour.”

“Man!” The screen tilted as a sheet was tossed back and a naked body, unnaturally small for the bulbous head, hopped off the flat, hard slate that was Kl’yi’cuyk’s bed. “I haven’t even had my coffee yet!”

In the medical wing of Eos Hospital, a Blondie stood up from his chair. His vacant eyes moved to the small camera in the corner of the room. He walked towards it, looked directly into it for over three minutes, then he slowly turned and started to rip his room apart.

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay so that is it for this portion of the story. I know that there is plenty left unsaid, but remember there will be a forth part which I have already started. I'm sorry to leave it on a bit of a cliff hanger, but I wanted to make sure you all READ the next part! :-) Hopefully it won't be too long before I get it up, (That sounded dangerously naughty- I mean post the story of course!!) I currently have an end and part of a middle but no real beginning, lol! Anyway, please be patient and remain supportive and I will do my best to post the next part soon. Thanks to everyone who left a review and anyone who leaves a review for this final chapter I will put their user name in the sequel somewhere. :)